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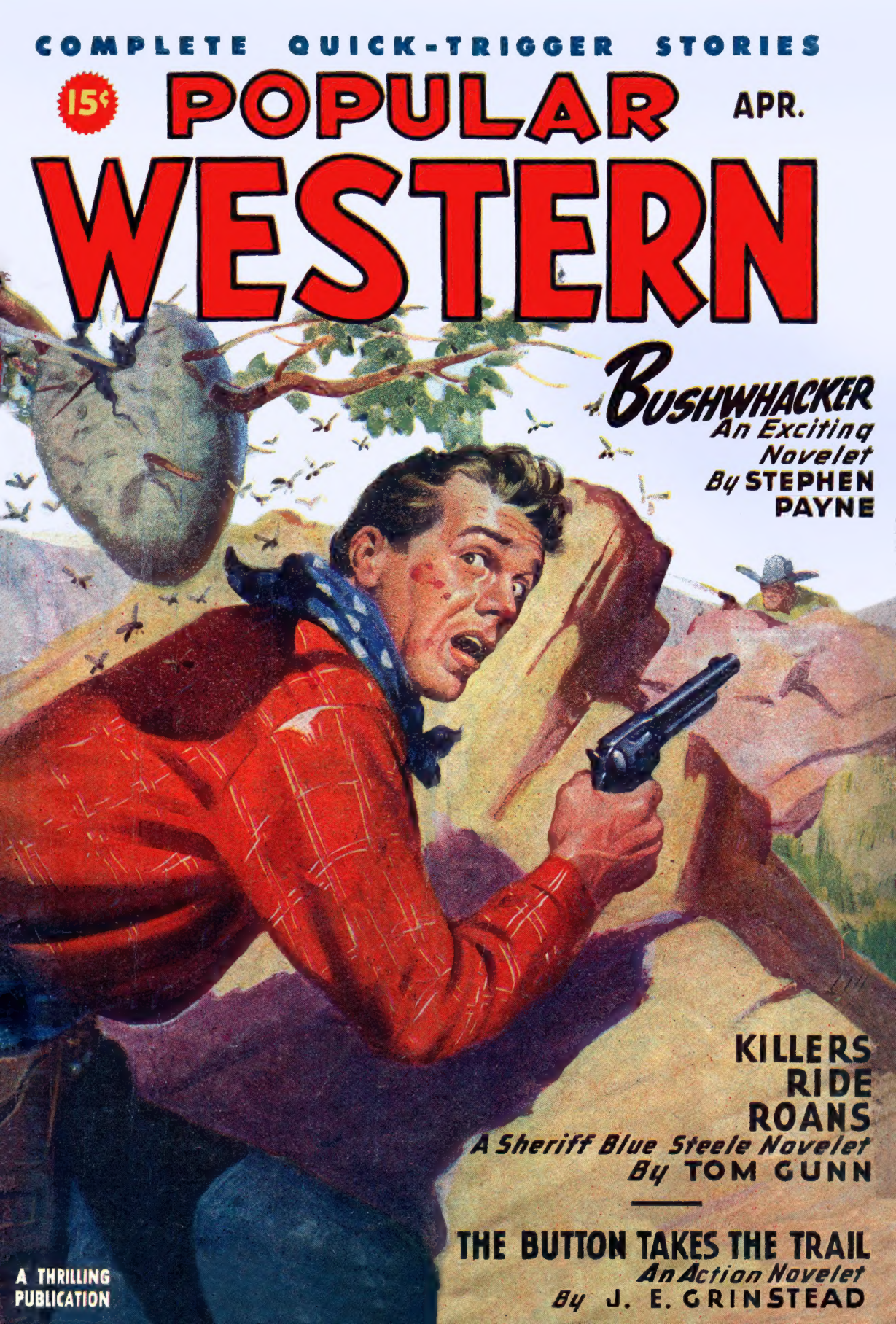

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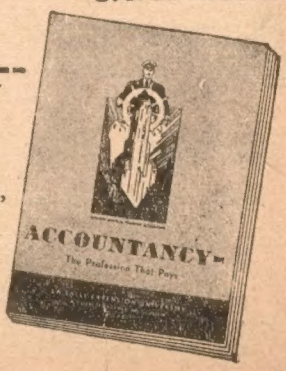

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When young Jed Rathbourne rides into the Arapahoe Hills country, he confronts killer peril—and sets out on a roaring gun rampage in order to head off the threat of range war! 11

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A tricky outlaw may seem to be in two places at once, but he can't evade the relentless pursuit of fighting law-dogs Steele and Watts!

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When an evil crew of gunmen raid and burn a ranch, they overlook a kid—and they come to learn that it is one plumb bad error!

Short Stories

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The Sweetgrass lawmen buck lobos worse than the four-legged variety

LEAD HORNETS ..... Donald Bayne Hobart 37

Blaze Dawe steals a payroll, and tries to cast suspicion on another

BOWDRIE RIDES A COYOTE TRAIL ..... Louis L'Amour 60

A dead man leads a Ranger on the trail of a dangerous killer

TENDERFOOT TROUBLE ..... Mel Pitzer 87

Old Sheriff Boyd Cooper learns a trick or two about fast drawing

CIRCLE-C SHOWDOWN ..... Ben Frank 94

Young Mem Muzzy proves that he knows how to handle a tough outlaw

and

THE HOME CORRAL ..... Doc Long Trail 6

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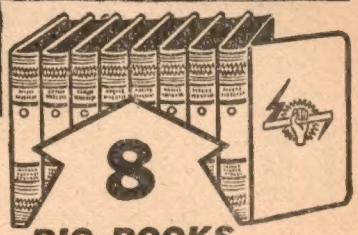

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The HOME CORRAL

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

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DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! We've got a heap of things to thresh out in this get-together, made up of things I've seen and places I've been out West recent.

You regular Home Corralers know I'm not much of a homebody. I've always been on the go and still am. I just never took root, somehow. That's why I'm called Doc Long Trail. But it ain't that I don't realize the joys and comforts of a home.

One of life's greatest adventures is the planning and building of a home. Lately I've been going around exploring new neighborhoods, talking with new home owners and trying to understand their thrill and pride.

Growing Cities and Towns

Here out West every city and town is growing like never before, with acres and miles of new suburbs, new streets, new mailboxes and new names on 'em. You see long rows of homes in every stage of construction—at one end just the foundations laid, at the other end finished houses all fresh-painted, with young lawns and washing fluttering from clotheslines. Everywhere the piney smell of new lumber is in the air.

Where does this enormous supply of timbers, scantlings, boards, shingles, sash and molding come from? You ever wondered, folks?

Well, I've gone from the towns to the far places and into the great forests of pine, spruce, fir, cedar and redwood that are crashing down under the biggest logging operations of all time.

They're felling and hauling at a rate undreamed-of even five years ago. On many highways in the Northwest there's an almost constant parade of huge logging trucks rolling to the milltowns.

One town that had three often-idle lumber mills ten years ago now has more than 40 where the saws shriek night and day and smoke from the trash-burners can be seen for miles. There are mountains of sawdust that wait for some saving genius to invent a way to make economical use of it.

A Strange New Tribe

Such a town—or young city—is Eugene, Oregon. The minute you land in Eugene you find yourself surrounded by a strange new tribe of people. Elbow your way along busy Willamette Street among this flannel-shirted tribe and you'll wonder and stare. These present-day woodsmen and millworkers don't look or dress like the Paul Bunyan bragger breed.

Here is what a logger of today is like:

Instead of tough and uncouth, he's more apt to be polite, well-spoken and friendly-mannered, though rough-dressed. He wears a flannel shirt, blue dungarees cut raggedy-short or "staggered" about halfway down the shin and—of all things—low-cut shoes or even house slippers!

In the woods they wear steel-calked boots. But it's bad manners in the logger world to wear punishing spikes on streets or in stores. You see signs in some places, "Calks not allowed." Same sort of a situation as real-thing cowboys that never wear their spurs indoors—except in some roughneck dive or saloon.

Bright Red Hats

The most common logger headgear is a bright red felt hat. This is for personal safety, specially when deer-hunters are abroad. Log truckers, for some reason nobody could tell me, nearly all wear white cotton or linen caps.

The reason for the staggered pants legs is

(Continued on page 8)

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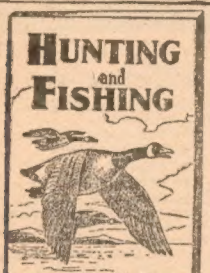

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

easy to figure out. Long ones catch on snags, are apt to trip a man whose life often depends on nimble-footedness. Specially when forest giants thunder down and saw crews have to move fast, to get from under.

Buy a paper, look at the want ads, which

is a good way for a quick sizeup of any community. Solid columns under "Help Wanted," called for scalers, graders, ratchet-setters and other odd-sounding jobs that have a meaning nowhere else.

On the town's outskirts, where new neighborhoods are springing up, same as everywhere else, you see fresh-built cottages or small farm places with a logging truck, the empty rear truck extension piled piggyback onto the front when idle or empty. Loggers and haulers and millmen by the thousands are locating on stumpage or logged-over land, clearing and hewing and gardening in their off-hours.

The Lumber Shortage

You homebuilders elsewhere maybe envy the timbermen their easy access to wood while you sweat out the shortage waiting for it. Well, it might be some consolation for you to know that the lumber shortage is just as severe in the Northwest, where the trees grow, as anywhere else. That is, unless you're connected with some little two-man mill operating in a privately-owned timber stand. Where you can cut your own unhindered by laws that restrict distribution.

A log, ready for millpond and saw, is a pretty forlorn remnant of what a few days or even hours before was a standing tree, the noblest work of the Creator. Topped and scaled, sometimes as thick through at the stump end as a man is tall, it is handled like a matchstick by heavy loading and unloading machinery. The litter or slashings left in the forest are piled and burned.

Plenty of Waste

Then when the log goes to the saw, the

(Continued on page 103)

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Looking down at the body of the husky young fellow, Jed felt bitter

BUSHWHACKER

By STEPHEN PAYNE

When young Jed Rathbourne rides into the Arapahoe Hills country, he confronts killer peril—and sets out on a roaring gun rampage to head off threatening range war!

CHAPTER I

Gun Welcome

JED RATHBOURNE was merely hunting a new range and a new cowpunching job when he struck the Arapahoe Hills country on a clear mid-summer morning. There were no weighty problems on his sturdy shoulders and no immediate necessity for him to reach Hill City or any other particular objective.

So atop a piny hill he reined in his black and surveyed the tangled maze of twisted little gulches and woodsy ridges which rolled on into the northern horizon as far as Jed's cheerful brown eyes could reach.

AN EXCITING COMPLETE NOVELET

Slim and boyish, with unruly black hair and a wide-lipped grin, Jed had that something about him which would identify him at once to ranchers or range foremen or even to Western town folks as a happy-go-lucky cowpuncher. One who hadn't sown all of his wild oats either, and had as yet no greater ambition than a thirst for new adventures.

He was now having his look at a brand new range, and he didn't particularly like what he saw.

"Too doggoned chopped-up and standin' on edge," he muttered. "Hardly enough room in the crooked valleys to bunch a herd. Sure, the jungles of scrub oak brush are mighty colorful. But a man'd have a battle gettin' through the stuff."

Still there were cattle in all the gullies, and only four-hundred odd yards distant, moseying along the nearest gulch, was a rider. All at once Jed stiffened in his well-worn saddle, forgetting that he had been building a smoke.

The body of the rider he saw jerked violently and his horse jumped wildly. The man, sagging to one side, slid out of his saddle. The ground caught his body and he lay as he had fallen, while across the hills whipped the sharp, unmistakable voice of a rifle.

With his right hand Jed slid his "makin's" into his shirt pocket. With his left he spun his horse, Coally, on its hind legs, and sent it back into the shelter of the pines. From this security, Jed looked out and noted a puff of rifle smoke on the ridge to his left as he gazed north. Up there, among rocks and pines, was a drygulcher.

Jed now took particular notice of the terrain. Could he, perhaps, head off that snake? He reckoned maybe he could.

CIRCLING a bit to the left, he cut down along the farther side of the gunman's ridge. Luck was with him, for he heard the drygulcher's horse, and then he saw the fellow heading westward. Jed, grim-eyed now, and with six-shooter in hand, was in time to intercept the man.

"Get 'em high, killer!"

In one glance, Jed's mind photographed the fellow, noting first that he had scabbarded his rifle. A tall, raw-boned and amazingly good-looking blond rider of forty or thereabouts, he did not look at all as young Jed thought a hard-bitten killer should look.

The astonished man lifted his bridle hand and made as if to grab his .45. Jed promptly ruined his fine black beaver Stetson with a bullet.

"No monkey business. I saw you bushwhack that hombre."

Sudden respect for a good shot came into the man's pale blue eyes that had suddenly gone cold and hard.

"Kid, you're locoed," he said, lifting his right hand and feeling the holes in his skypiece.

Six-gun cocked, and watching the man as a wild horse watches the buster about to mount it, Jed gave terse orders and expelled his breath with tremendous relief when at length he had his captive disarmed and securely tied—wrists to the fellow's saddle-horn, feet hobbled under his mount's belly.

Jed tied the killer's rifle and cartridge belt with holstered short gun to his own saddle, and mounted Coally.

"Now we'll see if anything can be done for that poor feller yuh shot. From the way he fell and lay so still, I figured there wasn't or I'd have gone to him and let you get away, bushwhacker."

He led his captive's horse back over the ridge and down into the gulch. The victim's horse had disappeared, but the man was where he had fallen.

When Jed had made certain the man was dead, he felt sick. Sick and disgusted; bitter and furiously angry.

The body was that of a husky young fellow with sandy complexion and sandy hair; a decent, clean-looking fellow. Overalls and blue cotton shirt which had seen many launderings, heavy, worn work shoes and a slouch hat not of the type commonly worn by cowpunchers, indicated that he was a homesteader. Apparently he had not been carrying a gun, and there seemed to be nothing by which to identify him.

Jed's captive showed a calm and calloused indifference when Jed snapped.

"I hope yuh're satisfied, yuh lobo. Who is he and why'd yuh do it?"

"I don't know one darned thing about any of this," the man said earnestly. "Where yuh figurin' on takin' me?"

"Hill City." Jed mounted Coally and stared northward. "Still," he went on, "I saw the smoke of a ranch northwest of here mebbe a couple of miles. I might turn in there. Strikes me cowboys'll give yuh the atmosphere jig a darned

Horses squealed and men swore, and, with a resounding thud, two men and their mounts piled up in a heap

sight quicker'n if the law gets yuh."

For the first time the man's composure vanished. He showed sudden, stark fear.

"Kid, don't do that. For gosh sakes don't take me to that L K Ranch."

"Yip!" cried Jed. "That outfit is onto yuh. It's wise to this snakish deal. So-o—"

"Take me to Hill City," the killer pleaded wildly. "I'll give yuh all the money I've got and my hoss to boot if you'll not drag me into the L K."

"The L K it is," snapped Jed.

"Aw now, have a heart, kid. I never done yuh no harm."

"Button yore lip!"

As he cut air line across the hills, Jed saw many cattle carrying the reversed L K Connected brand, and an equal number with Three 7's. In separate gulches he also noticed three different homestead shacks with signs of life about them. However, he swung past these, and presently dropped into a valley of some size for this chopped-up area. He went through a gate, rounded a bend, and came to a first-class set of log and lumber ranch buildings.

The sun was pointing short shadows due north as Jed rode into the yard. A dozen cowboys and ranch hands who had probably come in for dinner stormed out of the bunkhouse to stop dead still and stare at him and his captive.

LETTING his eyes run over them, Jed decided they were a rough and ready and mighty efficient crew—a little bit on the tough side, too, he thought. They seemed to be struck dumb with astonishment.

It was Jed who broke the silence.

"Where's the big boss, boys?"

"Yonder, at the main house," was the reply. "He's a-comin'."

Jed sized up a bareheaded, heavy-set man wearing neat corduroy trousers, brown boots and striped shirt. He had a big round face, a meaty nose, wirelike black hair, and small, sharp, black eyes. Magpie eyes. And he looked surprisingly young to be the boss of this big outfit.

This individual planted himself and tipped his head to one side, squinting hard at Jed's captive and from him to Jed.

"Who the devil are you, kid?"

Something in his tone needled the young puncher.

"Jed Rathbourne," he answered tartly. "Stranger in this neck of the woods. Who're you?"

The heavy man threw a glance loaded with meaning at his assembled crew.

"A stranger? That explains it—mebbe. Young feller," he added pompously, "I am Lawrence Alfred King, commonly known from my brand as 'L K'. This is my home ranch."

Jed lifted his glance toward the main house, where a flour-sack-aproned man cook had appeared at the door. No women or children were in evidence, so the young puncher judged it was a bachelor outfit.

"Well, Mr. King, I don't wonder all of yuh are flabbergasted to see me bringin' in a prisoner. But this here wolf—"

Jed had the undivided attention of every man present as he briefly outlined the grisly incident he had witnessed and told of his capturing the drygulcher. But he was at a loss to understand why several of the men looked slant-eyed at one another while some began to grin and then to chuckle.

"That's the how-come, L K," Jed said. "This killin' snake tried to bribe me not to bring him here, so I done it."

"He did!" said King, lifting his eyebrows high.

Jed knew he turned red, not with embarrassment but with chagrin over the way the boss and crew were acting.

"So take him off my hands," he concluded.

"We'll be tickled to do that," the boss exclaimed. "Won't we, boys? Light off, Jed. We're mighty glad yuh come here."

"That's more like the reception I expected," Jed began, stepping down from his saddle. "Hi! What yuh doin'?"

Six of the hands had pounced upon him like a pack of coyotes on a calf. So swift and so unexpected was their attack that Jed hadn't a chance to get his gun or even to lash out with his fists before he was spread-eagled on the hard gravel, held more tightly than a calf for the branding iron.

Three or four of the crew were slapping their legs and whooping with wicked glee. Jed raising his head, saw others releasing his recent captive and returning to the man his rifle and belt and six-shooter.

"Plumb careless of yuh to get caught, Hornton," L K said. "A black mark

agin you. But yuh shore played it smart with this kid. Plenty smart."

"I figured if I put up a howl against bein' taken to the L K, that was just where the young fool'd take me," Hornton replied smugly.

Jed writhed, and fought to free himself. With a man holding each of his arms and legs, and one sitting on his mid-section, this was useless effort. He relaxed.

"Are yuh right shore nobody else saw yuh?" he heard L K asking the good-looking killer.

"As shore of this as I am that I killed Ab Young," Hornton said shortly. "Jed told yuh he took me back to the body. . . . Boss, I'm burnin' to even scores with that young hombre. Let me tie him on his hoss and take him up to the Seven Mile Canyon jumpoff."

"Boys, get this puncher out of sight!" L K cut in with sudden excited urgency. "Quick! Take him and his hoss to the stable and put him in the box stall. Look, yonder! Wanda Young's comin'."

Hard hands lifted Jed and carried him at a swift trot to the stable. Yet he managed to see what had so alarmed Lawrence Alfred King—a girl riding at a gallop up the meadow from the same direction in which he had come to this ranch.

Long before she arrived, however, Jed had been dumped roughly on the plank floor of the stable's box stall. One man searched him, taking his belt, gun, pocket-knife, matches and money. He caught just a glimpse of his own horse and Hornton's being stalled before the men backed out of his prison and closed the door.

CHAPTER II

Out Again—Caught Again

WOOZY and battered, and mad clear through, Jed leaped to his feet and rushed to the door. It was securely fastened on the outside and he couldn't budge it.

A survey of the stall disclosed a manger in one corner, and above it, opening to the hay loft overhead, a hay hole so small he would not be able to squeeze his shoulders through it. The same with the only window, high up on the north wall, and fitted inside with iron bars.

This was the sort of stall generally used to house a stallion. The bars, no doubt, were to prevent the animal from breaking the window if it attempted to thrust its head through the opening.

Noticing that floor, walls and roof were of solid planks, Jed lost hope of escaping. He was penned in to stay.

Sounds of feet and voices came from outside, and the door swung open. In the opening appeared a man with a six-shooter. Behind him were Hornton, L K King, and a strikingly attractive ash-blond girl. She was obviously terribly upset, though she was making an heroic attempt to control her emotion.

Her blue eyes were hot and bright as she looked young Jed up and down with open hostility and scorn. But when she spoke there was puzzled wonder in her voice.

"Why, he's just a young fellow. He doesn't look like a hard-bitten gunman."

"Never can tell from the looks of a man how tough and mean he is," L K said easily, and Jed saw him wink behind the girl's back at Hornton, a man who certainly would never be taken for what he really was.

"Wanda, I'm mighty sorry I wasn't in time to stop this devil," L K went on. "Still, we can be thankful I was in time to cut off his escape and nail him."

As the man's meaning got home to Jed, he felt his face twist wryly, and he reckoned he did look mean enough to do a killing.

"Why did you do it?" the girl asked, her eyes probing Jed's face. "I never saw you before. You couldn't have had any grudge against us Youngs."

"Of course he'll lie faster than a horse can trot," L K cut in. "I've already said that it's plumb likely that Greg Williams of the Three Sevens hired this sneakin' drygulcher."

"Yes, he might," returned the disturbed and grief-stricken girl. "Greg Williams has been openly and bitterly hostile to all of us settlers here in Arapahoe Hills."

Jed clamped his lips. Denial that he had murdered Ab Young, talk of any kind, could do him no good when the deck was stacked against him. However, little by little he was getting a sketch of

the grisly situation.

L K had given Wanda an ardent glance, and his heavy bass voice lowered softly when he spoke to her.

"But yuh know, Wanda," he said, "how I've been the friend of all the settlers around here. I'm mighty glad and happy yuh come to me when yuh found yore brother's body. Believe me, I'm now goin' to do all I can to help yuh."

"Thank you, Mr. King," said the girl, very low, and without raising her eyes. "First, what's to do with this bushwhacker? If our neighbors, Ox Bow Nate Edwards particularly, were to get hold of him, they'd—take the law into their own hands. And I don't want that. Oh, it's so horrible I don't even want to appear against this wicked cowboy."

Lawrence Alfred King patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"There, there, my dear. I'll take care of everything. Cecil"—he spoke to Hornton, who had been a frozen-faced, immobile figure in the background—"you take this killer to Hill City and turn him over to Sheriff Piper. Get a couple of hosses ready."

Hornton nodded and moved to a stall, where he backed out Jed's Coally. He bridled the horse, and left it standing between the rows of stalls while he went to get his own mount.

L K had taken Wanda's arm possessively, and was escorting her away.

"Come on to the house," he was saying, "and rest yoreself." Over his shoulder he said to the cowboy who was guarding Jed with a cocked gun, "Fred, I reckon the rest of the boys are eatin' dinner, but I'll send a couple of 'em to help you and Cecil tie that scoundrel and load him on his nag."

JED'S eyebrows drew almost together. Until now he had never been embroiled in a range war. But in many bunkhouses and around many roundup campfires he had listened to adventures of grizzled old-timers who had been through the mill, and he had learned things which he would do well to remember now.

Cecil Hornton, the killer, had been designated to take Jed to town. This was merely to hoodwink Wanda Young, for L K King, and even more particularly Hornton, would never, never permit the young cowpuncher to tell his story to a square-shooting sheriff. Somewhere between the L K ranch and Hill City Jed would be shot dead, and Hornton would have an airtight excuse.

"He tried to escape," it would be. "I was forced to kill him!"

All of this, and much more, went through Jed's mind in a twinkling before Hornton had backed the second horse from its stall, and before anyone else had come to help Hornton and Fred. Fred was now the obstacle in Jed's way. This fellow, with ugly, slitted eyes, was pointing his gun at the captive with unwavering attention.

Jed looked beyond him, noted that the back door of the stable stood wide open, and then, as if in surprise, he cried low:

"Don't shoot him, Bill!"

Sharp disappointment lanced through the captured cowboy as the ruse fell flat. Fred guffawed.

"Did yuh think yuh could hook me with that long-haired 'un, kid? Ho-h—"

His "Ho-haw" was cut short. The motion of Jed's arms and hands was faster than most human eyes could follow. His right fist socked into the pit of Fred's stomach, and his left knocked aside the gun, which exploded in Jed's face, nearly blinding him, yet doing no other harm. Although he was doubled over in a knot with the wind knocked out of him, Fred nevertheless held tight to the weapon.

Jed had no time to spare in grappling with him, and his next move was to hurl Fred out of his path. He then fairly hurtled up into the saddle on Coally's back. He snatched up the bridle reins and sent the pony out through the stable's back door as if it had been an arrow shot from a bow. Nor was he a sliced second too soon.

From the corner of his eye Jed saw Cecil Hornton bound out of a stall to the middle of the barn, and whip out his Colt, and open fire. Jed heard the whistling, snarling bullets before Coally zipped into the cover of willows bordering a stream.

In no time at all, Hornton and probably half the L K crew would be after Jed like mustang hunters running down a wild bunch. Not short of Hill City could he hope to find either help or safety.

Knowing the town lay somewhere to the north, he turned that way and rode for his life. Coally struck the north fence of the L K, cleared it like a deer

and tossed his head, running on. When horse and rider at last hit a road, Jed held to it, even though four or five or six hard-riding men were swarming into sight behind him, lashing their mounts to overtake him, or at least to get within easy gunshot.

Pursuit was slowly but surely creeping up on Jed's gallant black, and Jed was figuring he must take to the brush and try to hide when he came upon the small cowtown. It was nestled in a beautiful spot in a woodsy and grassy basin among high, rugged hills. But Jed didn't notice that just then.

He asked a final burst of speed from Coally and came thundering along the quiet main street, waking up a few dozing horses tied to hitchrails; waking up the town folks. Seeing three men rush out of a store, Jed skidded Coally to a stop.

"Where's the sheriff?" he demanded.

"His office is right over there," one told him, pointing across the street.

"Good!" shouted Jed, and dashed toward the small building. "Men," he flung over his shoulder, "hold the L K outfit off me. Side me blind in this deal, till I can tell yuh about it!"

A deep and real worry had grown in his mind that maybe he would not find safety here if the L K punchers swarmed right into town after him. Terrific relief flowed over him as a solid man, with a sheriff's star on the lapel of his ragged, unbuttoned vest, stepped out of the office.

"Star-toter, I've shore got an earful to tell yuh!" panted the cowboy.

"Well then, come inside," the lawman said coolly.

Jed's boots hit ground.

"This way, Hornton can't get a shot at me so easy," he thought.

HE PLUNGED into the dim, cool little office. Sheriff Piper followed him and closed the door.

"Stranger, ain't yuh, son? What's yore gosh-awful yank?"

Jed took a quick survey of the room, a window facing the street, another facing an alley, a door opening to another room at the rear. He tried the door, and after satisfying himself it was locked, he drew the window blinds. Since he had hit town he had neither seen nor heard his pursuers, but they would not be likely to give up.

"It's like this, Sheriff—"

His words falling over one another, Jed told of the killing he had witnessed, of the drygulcher he had captured, and what had happened when he had taken Hornton to the L K Ranch.

"Now, half the crew's hot on my trail," he ended, "and—"

"Whoa! Hold up!" the peace officer interjected. "Kid, yore wild yarn don't make sense."

"Why not?" Jed flashed back. "What is the set-up here as you understand it?"

"Well, the trouble spot is in the hills south of town. Two big cow outfits did have almost undisputed control of all that area—King's L K outfit and Greg Williams' Three Sevens."

"Did they hit it off together all right?"

"So far as I know. But I will say that Williams is an old-timer and plenty hoggish and ornery. Young King—L K, as he likes to be called—inherited from his dad, another knotty old-timer who hated to see the country get settled up and was death on nesters. But this young feller ain't at all like his father. Nope, L K King is the settlers' friend. He declares right out that they've a right to their homesteads and a right to live in peace."

"Is that why yuh say my story don't make sense?" demanded Jed.

The lawman nodded vigorously.

"Yeah, that's why. These settlers began movin' in last fall. More come this past spring. King has welcomed 'em. On the other hand, Greg Williams has even threatened violent action against 'em and, though he hasn't actually done anything yet I've heard about, I'd not put startin' a war past that tough old rawhider."

"Heckamile!" Jed snorted. "Get this through yore head, Sheriff! This Williams says what he thinks. But it's plain to me that King is a two-faced sneak. From what I've told yuh, yuh can see he's touched a match to the powder, hopin' and expectin' to keep under cover so's nobody—except his own crew—would get onto him."

"Hold up!" the sheriff ordered again. "Somebody's touched off the dynamite, yes—if yore yarn's part true. But it ain't believable that L K King would have Abner Young drygulched. Confound it! Everybody knows King's been courtin' Ab's sister, Wanda, and expects to marry her. The girl and her brother

are the only two left of the family, I've heard. Now I ask yuh, kid, would King have the brother of the girl he expects to marry put out of the way deliberate?"

"L K must have had a reason for it," Jed retorted.

He lifted the shade of the window facing Main Street and took a careful look. Across the street was congregated quite a group of men—citizens all, from the look of them—their interest centered in the sheriff's office and Jed's Coally. Yet they apparently had no intention of coming to see what Jed's call was about.

None of the L K men were in sight. That made it seem as if they had given up the chase when they had seen Jed dash into town.

"What possible reason?" Sheriff Piper snapped. "It don't make sense, young feller. Nor yet can I believe that Cecil Hornton's a killer. He's been here over a year and he's made a first-class reputation as a fine feller. Yuh know yoreself he's a mighty fine-appearin' hombre."

"Yeah," scoffed Jed. "Just as two-faced as a double-bitted ax. Built this good reputation to hide behind. The plain ugly facts, Sheriff, are just what I said: I heard L K King plant the idea in Wanda Young's mind that Greg Williams of the Three Sevens was behind her brother's killin'. That will run like a prairie fire, and the settlers'll r'ar up and go after the Three Sevens outfit muy pronto.

"I'm hungry as a coyote four days in a trap at a dry bone bait, but that don't matter. You've got yore work cut out for yuh and I'll side yuh. Let's get busy."

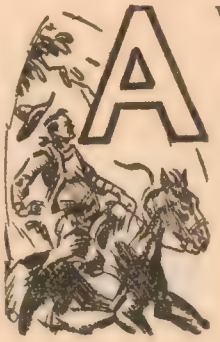
"Shore, I'll get busy lookin' into this mess, even though I can't believe . . . Hi! What—"

Sheriff Piper never finished his question. With astounding suddenness the door between the two rooms had opened and three men had leaped through it. In the ensuing sliced second Jed recognized Cecil Hornton and two other L K punchers. Before he could act, or even think, the two had pounced upon him, and Hornton had swung a club to the lawman's skull.

As Piper went down, Hornton hit again for good measure before giving his attention to Jed. Fighting as corralled mustangs fight a rope, the young cowboy might have laid out both his assailants had not a blow from Cecil Hornton stunned him.

CHAPTER III

Sidewinder Scheme



AWAKENING as if from a drugged sleep, Jed Rathbourne's first sensation was the throbbing ache in his head. Next, he became aware of aches all over his body. Then he discovered he was astride a horse, not his own Coally, tied to the saddle, and that he was in the midst of a group of five riders, two of whom rode double on one horse.

The sun was far to the west and, from the appearance of the rough and woodsy terrain, Jed decided he was still in the Arapahoe Hills. Slowly, full recollection of what had happened returned, and he identified the men as five of the L K hands. They were letting their horses move at a slow walk as if to kill time. Hornton was not among them.

Jed began to draw in deep lungfuls of the pine-tangy air and felt his strength returning.

Possibly a half-hour later the party climbed a steep ridge on a trail that wound through a jungle of scrub-oak brush. Then, as if by prearranged plan, the men halted in a small clearing among pines, atop the ridge. All five dismounted. One fellow shuffled away as if to scout around, three sprawled on the ground in relaxed attitudes, and the fifth tied Jed's stolid mount to a heavy pine.

"What's this stop mean?" Jed asked him.

The heavy-set renegade batted his eyes at the young puncher.

"Come round at last, have yuh? . . . Well, from this ridge yuh can look down on Ox Bow Nate Edwards' shack." He pointed east and went on. "Ox Bow Nate's the big chief of the danged nesters. King had one of his L K men haul Ab Young's body to Nate's place and tell him what had happened."

"*King's* version of what happened?" Jed put in sourly.

"Shore! And of course Nate has sent

word to all his friends to gather here at his place. We're waitin' for them nesters to get organized, then we is goin' to turn yuh over to 'em and stand off and watch 'em hang yuh."

Earlier on this hectic day, Jed had felt cold, but the frightening chill which now ran over him was ten times greater than any other. Yet he managed to speak steadily.

"I suppose that's the reason you cusses didn't finish me off there in the sheriff's office?"

"Hey, Gus," one of the loungers called, "don't go runnin' off at the mouth. That wildcat might get loose again."

"Not a chance," returned Gus, inspecting the rope which bound Jed's wrists to the saddle-horn. "Kid, when yuh zinged into town ahead of us yuh shore had us worried. But Cecil Hornton seen how we could play the game plumb smart. Clever hombre, that pretty boy. With a gift of gab, too."

The man bit off a big chew of tobacco and squinted wicked eyes at Jed.

"A lot of them town jakes seen you slam into Hill City and dive into the badge-toter's office. But they never seen us fellers. We slid in the back way. A bit later, when they heard a ruckus in Piper's den and busted in there, they seen their lawman clubbed to death, the back doors open, and you gone."

"Piper clubbed to death?" Jed echoed. "To *death?*"

"Shore. Hornton figgered mebbe he'd believe what yuh told him. Hornton slipped out of town with us, but he doubled back to make talk with them town jakes. Young feller, it's mighty likely them scissorbills is now certain you drygulched Ab Young, certain that Greg Williams' Three Sevens outfit hired yuh to do it, and plumb dead shore yuh kilt their sheriff."

With this, Gus moved away to join the man who had returned from his scouting.

"The nesters is siftin' in to Ox Bow Nate's place like dry dogies to a waterhole," Jed heard this fellow report. "Watchin' 'em even from a half-mile off a feller can see they're frothin'. We won't have long to wait."

The faint scuff of hoofs announced the arrival of more L K men, King among them. He congratulated the bunch on recapturing Jed.

"The plan's workin' out fine except for one little thing," he said sourly. A black scowl twisted his features. "And that one is plumb bad. Where's Hornton?"

As if to answer to his name, Hornton rode out of the pines. His horse dripped sweat, but the man himself looked as calm and unruffled as if he had merely been out for an airing.

"Hello, L K," he greeted. "Yore bein' here means that Dizzy got to the ranch and reported to yuh all jake."

"He did," returned King. "How'd yuh make out in town, Cecil?"

HORNTON snapped his long, flexible fingers.

"Nothin' to it. I've built up such a fine reputation that all them hombres believe me and trust me. They even wanted me—*me*—to step in as sheriff and lead the hunt for the crazy young devil who killed Piper. I sort of hinted mebbe it'd be well if they didn't appoint or elect a new lawman until after they settled accounts with the Three Sevens outfit."

Jed felt himself sizzle with helpless

[*Turn page*]

...ITS QUALITY
HITS THE SPOT!

rage; hot rage which drove away the terrific aching of his sore head.

"Is Hill City enough stirred up so's the town men'll jump on the Three Sevens?" King asked.

Hornton nodded, and smiled with cruel satisfaction.

"Only we hope the nesters'll beat 'em to it. How's that little dish cookin' up, Boss?"

"Let's go take a look at Ox Bow Nate's place," suggested L K, and dropped his voice so low Jed scarcely caught his next words. "Hornton, all tarnation's to pay with the girl."

"What yuh mean?" Hornton shot back.

"When Dizzy dashed in to the ranch with the news yuh sent from town, I thought Wanda was lyin' down in the spare bedroom. Well, Dizzy and I talked pretty free, and cuss it, the girl was listening. I just happened to catch her at it."

Hornton drew his breath in sharply.

"And you was plannin' to marry her! What'd yuh do, L K?"

"Locked her up, pronto. What else could I do? Smoky hills! If she gets to Ox Bow Nate with the truth, no tellin' what'll happen!"

The two men were moving eastward across the clearing. As their voices faded out, Jed felt more elation, yet even deeper concern than at any time since the start of this strange adventure. He was elated because Wanda Young knew the truth, yet concerned for her safety, for her very life. Like Jed, she would never have the chance to tell what she knew.

Would King and Hornton dare to kill her? Probably rather than lose in this wicked game they were playing, since losing this game meant losing their own lives. Just what were they up to? Jed was still puzzling about that when all of the assembled men marched over to the east to gaze down into the deep valley wherein lay "Ox Bow" Nate Edwards' homestead.

No sooner had this happened than a man Jed had not seen before swiftly emerged from among the pines and came directly to Jed's horse. He was a medium-sized, rough-hewn, leathery individual with shrewd gray eyes. His age was uncertain, but snow-white hair showed under the brim of his greasy black hat and his face was deeply grooved. Yet he was, withal, as active as a mustang, and tough and wiry.

His pocket-knife flashed in the late afternoon sunlight as he cut the cord on Jed's wrists, then swiftly untied the horse. He had snatched the bridle reins and had led the animal in amongst the pines when a voice howled:

"Our prisoner's gettin' away! He's gone!"

Instantly feet were pounding across the clearing, L K men running to get their saddle horses. Jed's friend reached up and plucked the numbed young cowboy from his saddle. He fastened the reins up to the saddle-horn, and belted the horse on the rump with his hat. As the animal leaped to a run down the east side of the ridge toward Ox Bow Nate's and vanished into the scrub-oak brush, the man half-carried Jed farther back among the pines and pressed him down flat against the earth.

In less than a minute, four L K men were mounted and thundering after the runaway horse. Jed heard King's voice demanding to know how it had happened, and roaring that he would kill somebody for carelessness.

"The town jakes or nesters'll shore get 'im if we don't!" one man retorted. "Anyhow, that kid can't mess up our game now."

"Can't he?" barked King. "Mebbe he heard me say the girl is wise to us. . . . Hornton, that doggoned younker will head to the L K ranch to try to find Wanda. Take two good boys with yuh and beat him to it."

"Yuh took the words out of my mouth, Boss," Hornton clipped. "What'll I do with the girl?"

"She's got to be shut up, and I'm countin' on you to do it," L K King replied savagely.

The wiry old-timer who had rescued Jed gripped the young cowboy's hand.

"Let's make ourselves hard to find in this jungle," he whispered, and led the way down the western face of the big ridge.

Trailing his new friend, Jed said, scarcely above a whisper:

"Was I glad to see you! But who are yuh?"

"Greg Williams."

JED could not control his whistle of astonishment.

"Williams of the Three Sevens? Yuh got any cowboys near by?"

The two were now deep into the scrub-oak brush, and Williams paused.

"No," he said. "It's my bad luck to be all alone, and it's nine miles to my ranch, the nearest help for us."

"But it's my good luck yuh found me," Jed began. "How—"

"I was headin' to town," the cowman cut in, "when I sighted a bunch of riders with somebody in the middle of 'em tied to his hoss. Well, instead of meetin' them fellers and askin' what was up, I played Injun and trailed 'em. I don't usually go for coyotin' around and eavesdroppin', yet this once I done both them things . . . Hist!"

Jed heard horses crashing through the brush, the noise which had caught Williams' attention.

"That's Hornton and two others heading to the L K," he said grimly.

"Yeh, and ain't it too bad I can't see 'em to shoot 'em! Son, I got a hoss cached close here. Let's get to the critter."

They moved quickly onward.

"I don't savvy all of this snakish play," Jed said. "Do you, Mr. Williams?"

"I was stumped first off, but I savvy it now." The man's voice was harsh and his face grim as death itself. "King, the two-faced coyote, pretendin' to be the great friend and champion of the settlers, and also my friend, really hates 'em and hates me. So, takin' advantage of my blunt hostility toward them settlers, King and this Cecil Hornton—"

Williams broke off to denounce Hornton thoroughly.

"Mighty fine-lookin' hombre, he is, so doggoned smooth and nice-mannered nobody'd ever suspect he's a snake-in-the-grass, smarter than L K King and meaner 'n poisoned waterholes."

"But you were sayin'?" Jed put in impatiently.

"Oh, yeah! . . . Hornton and King figgered to get them squatters so all-fired worked up they'd start a shootin' war against the Three Sevens, and mebbe all of 'em get gunned out. To touch off the dynamite, Hornton drygulched the best-liked young feller in the settlers' camp, Ab Young, and King spreads the rumor I'm responsible."

Jed thrust in a sharp query.

"Why'd they pick Young when King was—"

"Shinin' up to Wanda? So happens I can answer that, son, for one of my cowboys had made friends with Ab Young, against my wishes. Though darn me if I ain't got a soft spot for the girl, her and her brother tryin' to make a go of a jackrabbit homestead. Takes grit and she's got it. Also she's—"

"What'd yore cowboy tell yuh, Mr. Williams?"

"Huh? Said Ab had told him confidential he had no use for L K King, figgered him for a slippery two-timer. This cowboy said Ab had had the nerve to tell King he'd be darned if he'd have him sparkin' Wanda, and to ride a long way round his homestead. Now that alone'd be plenty reason for King to have Hornton 'gulch Ab. But it also fitted into his plans.

"Of course, when the settlers came after me a lot of 'em would be killed. Them left alive—if any—would be so scared after they cooled down and realized what they'd done, they'd light a fire under 'emselves to get to places elsewhere. King would then take over the Three Sevens and control this whole neck of the woods. Just one big outfit. His outfit. Well, here's my hoss."

CHAPTER IV

Set Afoot

JED saw a sturdy bay concealed in the brush. His first look was to see if there was a rifle on Williams' saddle, and disappointment lanced through him. There was none.

Then Williams was speaking again.

"Same thing strikes you as me, I reckon," he said. "That the only person who can tell them settlers the truth and call off their war on me is Wanda Young. Same holds true for the Hill City bunch, too. They're out to kill both of us, son. But I think Wanda can make 'em change their tune."

"I know that," said Jed. "But now Hornton and a couple of gunslingers are shore to beat us to the L K ranch. What will they do to the girl?" He dreaded even to think of it.

All the sharp ridges of Williams' rawhide face were tight-drawn.

"This bunch can't have her let the

cat out of the bag. They'll kill her, or Hornton'll take her off some place. Less you stop him, son."

To Jed's surprise the cowman was buckling his gun-belt with holstered Colt attached around the young cowboy's hips.

"Yuh'll need this more'n I will even," Williams said. "I'll tell yuh how to cut through the hills and brush and hit the L K ranch, by the back door, as yuh might say."

Directions followed until Jed broke in:

"I'm shore that's the way I left the ranch—in one heck of a hurry, too. I know how to get there . . . Ain't you comin' with me?"

For a moment indecision seemed to hold Williams, then he shook his head.

"I'd like to, son. But there is two horns to this double-danged problem. Any second Ox Bow Nate and his boilin' mad crew may line out for my ranch. If they do, I've got to head 'em off somehow. Got to. My family and my hired men ain't expectin' no trouble. They'd be caught off guard and massacred and my buildings'd all be burnt. That sheriff killin' on top of the other—me back of it, so they think!—will make them nesters plumb unreasonable."

"I savvy," said Jed, and mounted the bay. "Somehow I'll get Wanda and bring her to Ox Bow Nate's place. You be careful, Mr. Williams?"

"Don't worry about me, son. I fought Injuns afore you was born. A lot more lives than ours is hangin' by a hair here. Play yore hand foxy if yuh can."

As Jed rode away through the oak brush, gratitude toward the wiry, game old ranchman brought a lump into his dry throat. Greg Williams was the kind of cowman he understood and loved, one who would speak his mind and fight his enemies fairly and openly. L K King was of another stripe.

The young cowboy gritted his teeth and gave full attention to getting to the L K ranch, by the back door, in the briefest possible time. . . .

The sun was gone and darkness was marching across summer's long twilight when from the north Jed came down through the willows to a point near the stable on the L K Ranch. Here he stopped and tied his panting, lathered horse and quickly moved to the edge of the sheltering willows for a look-see.

He had dared to hope he might be in time to find Wanda Young before Cecil Hornton arrived, a forlorn hope which died as he saw one rider in the act of corralling the horse cavvy. Two saddled horses stood near the main house, one man holding them and talking with another individual whom Jed identified as the cook. Then, out of the house, sort of forcing Wanda Young along ahead of him, came Hornton.

There was barely enough twilight left for Jed to see her tight-drawn face, yet she carried herself with resolute defiance. He was, also, too far off to hear what she was saying, but Cecil Hornton threw his voice toward the man who had corralled the cavvy:

"Saddle a gentle hoss for her, Doug, and make it pronto. She won't show sense and agree to keep her mouth shut, so we've got to go through with this."

The back door of the big stable had already served Jed well, on this momentous day. Now, with a wild plan in mind, a desperate, spur-of-the-moment plan, he slipped stealthily through this door and stole forward to a stall near the front entrance. Would Doug, the man at the corral, lead a horse inside the stable to saddle it?

JED hadn't long to wait. Doug, a solid individual no taller than Jed himself, wearing bat-wing chaps, a dark shirt and a black hat, did lead the horse he had roped into the barn. He put a bridle on the animal, and reached for a saddle blanket and saddle on a rack near the box stall where Jed had once been imprisoned.

Jed permitted the fellow to tighten the cinch on the saddle, while—all too slowly for Jed—the darkness increased. Doug was lifting the stirrup down from the saddle-horn where he had hooked it to facilitate the cinching job, when Jed came out of hiding and moved up behind him.

Old Greg Williams' six-shooter, clenched in Jed's hand, swung up and slammed down on Doug's black hat. *Thud!* Doug's knees buckled, and Jed's left arm shot around the fellow's body and eased it to the floor.

Another moment, and Jed had dragged the man to the box stall. Here, working frantically against time, aware that Hornton and the others, with Wanda, were coming across the yard to the sta-

ble, Jed stripped off the man's cartridge belt and his chaps and hat. Gun and belt he tossed aside; chaps and hat he put on quickly, and as quickly he reached into Doug's pocket to get his jack-knife before he boosted the man into the box stall.

He had closed the door and fastened it when Hornton's voice slapped him.

"What yuh foolin' around that stall for? Get a wiggle on yoreself, Doug! Them nesters is liable to beat us to the Three Sevens Ranch. I want to get there ahead of 'em, for I want 'em to find this gal nigh the Three Sevens, so's it'll look like Greg Williams or his men killed her. That, boys, will make old Ox Bow Nate and his mob so cussed frothin' they'll stop at nothin'."

Hornton's plan was so ruthless, so utterly diabolical, that Jed felt cold sweat break out on him. Had he believed he could win in a gun fight against Hornton and the other two, he would have opened fire. Nor was that all. If bullets started flying one might hit the girl. He must not force her to take that chance. Besides, he was not a gun hand, and if he lost the fight Wanda was definitely doomed.

As it was, Jed had an ace in the hole because his identity had not been discovered. Calmly he turned the horse around and led it out through the door, holding it while Hornton and the cook tossed Wanda up into the saddle.

"Tie her wrists to the horn—that's safe and simple," said Hornton, doing just that as he spoke. "Bring up the other nags, Fred. You rannies are so rattled I have to tell yuh everything to do."

Jed took a long, long chance by venturing to speak.

"I'll get 'em," he mumbled, and ran toward the house near which Hornton's and Fred's mounts were standing, ground-hitched.

Working with feverish haste, Jed made use of his recently acquired pocket-knife before he led the two animals back to the group at the stable. Fred had gone to the corral and had brought up the horse which Doug had been using. Therefore, though Jed wished much to open the corral gate and let out the cavvy, he dared not take the chance.

"Here yuh are, Doug," Fred said, handing Jed the reins. The party was ready to go, the cook, as before, staying on the ranch.

Jed, the knife in his hand, had one more chore to do, and he did it, but in such a terrific hurry he felt it was done badly.

As he turned and closed the knife and jabbed it into one pocket, Horton and Fred were mounting. Hornton was holding fast to the bridle reins of Wanda's horse. But Jed leaped forward and jerked them from his hand at the instant Hornton's saddle rolled from his horse's back.

The same mishap was happening with Fred. Both men took violent falls in the dust, and their suddenly frightened mounts, wheeling, snorting and kicking, pulled away from them, leaving behind what appeared to be broken bridles.

This much Jed had seen out of the corner of his eye. The two men were piled up with their saddles, and their horses were in flight. With fierce joy surging through him, he sprang up behind the girl's saddle on Wanda's mount.

As he dug in his heels and the horse zinged away from the L K Ranch on the main trail, Jed heard the thunderstruck cook yell:

"Doug's takin' away the gal!"

"Doublecrossin' us?" Hornton's voice ripped in reply. "I'll—" He choked.

IF HE had said more, Jed and Wanda could not have heard it above Fred's savage cursing. From the tail of his eye, Jed saw Hornton run to the horse which had been Doug's mount and fling himself astride. For a brief moment, Jed felt that he had failed, until Hornton yanked at the bridle and goaded the nag. Then the bridle dropped from the horse's head and the saddle keeled off over its rump. Hornton took his second fall, a much nastier spill than the first.

Jed could not actually see all this, but from the noises he knew what had happened.

"How'd you pile them up that way?" he heard Wanda asking.

He chuckled, his first chuckle in uncounted hours.

"Cut headstalls and latigos. I can use my knife now on the rope holdin' you, but got to be most awful careful, the way we're bouncin' around, or I'll cut yuh."

The horse was traveling like a bullet, yet Wanda turned her pretty head.

"Who are you?" Her face was close to his, and he heard her breath escape in

sheer amazement. "Oh! Now I recognize you, Jed. This is almost too good to be true."

Jed had succeeded in cutting the cord. Although talk was extremely difficult, as he pocketed his knife he asked:

"What's too good to be true, Miss Wanda?"

"That you got away from those wicked men for the second time. I heard about what happened in Hill City, and I nearly went crazy, knowing they were going to turn you over to Ox Bow Nate, and that my friends would most certainly hang you!"

"Let's not talk about that," said Jed, oddly conscious of her nearness, and of the deep concern for him in her voice—something that was strange and new. "Now yuh're goin' to get to yore friends and stop one of the snakiest range wars ever thought of."

"What's that sound behind us, Jed?" Wanda interrupted, and he felt her shiver with returning fear.

The outside gate of the L K Ranch had been left open, so they had not stopped there, and they were flying along under the stars as swiftly as the double-burdened horse could carry them. Jed reckoned, come what might, that he would never, never forget this night and the joy of riding with Wanda. But he recognized the racket behind them as the definite clatter of beating hoofs.

"Can't be over a couple of miles to Ox Bow's place," he said. "We'll make it." He strove to make his voice as reassuring as he could.

But he was remembering how L K King and the larger number of his men were on the high ridge which lay between the L K Ranch and Ox Bow Nate's homestead. They would hear this noise and—well, judging from the sound of pursuit, Jed and Wanda were likely to be caught between two hostile forces.

"You did set Hornton afoot," Wanda said. "But they had the cavvy corralled."

"And I just hadn't time or chance to turn it out," Jed said, with self-reproach. "Wanda, you know there's heaps more than my worthless neck at stake?"

"Yes, I know. Hornton and King. Oh, how they fooled me and all of my friends! They're devils! Plain devils. They hope to have my friends completely wipe out the Three Sevens. And I'm the only one who can stop it!"

CHAPTER V

Lone Hand

THE ominous racket of pursuit was louder. Jed cocked his head, listening. Hornton and Fred, the cook, and Doug, too, whom they'd have found—Jed hadn't hit as hard as he now realized he should have—must be furious. They were simply killing their new mounts. And Jed's and Wanda's overburdened horse could not hold this terrific pace much longer.

"Get me the rope on yore saddle," Jed said rapidly, talking into the girl's ear. "I'm goin' to try to hold Hornton off while yuh get to yore friends. Yuh must! Here's yore greatest danger."

He told her of King and the others on the ridge, and that, if they heard a horse speeding toward the homesteader's place, they would head it off.

"So, Wanda, for at least the last half mile, yuh must pull down and go slow. So slow King won't hear yuh. If anybody does cut yuh off, take to the heavy brush. It's mighty hard to find anybody in the doggoned stuff, specially at night."

"I understand," said the girl. She had long since taken the bridle reins, and she now handed the coiled rope to Jed. "If I catch sight of any of that awful bunch, I'll go into the brush like a cottontail rabbit."

"And yuh'll slow down so they won't hear yuh?"

"Yes, Jed. Listen! Hornton's getting closer every second. Must you really try to stop him and the others? They'll kill you!"

"Aw, no, they won't," Jed shot back confidently.

"You will be careful?"

The deep concern in her voice stirred him. She cared what happened to him, and somehow that made him happy.

"You bet! Now that I've met you, Wanda, I've got something to live for. Don't slow down. Luck to yuh, pardner. Here I go!"

Jed jerked himself nearly upright on the racing horse's rump and jumped. He

failed to hold his feet, turned end over end, and picked himself up from a scrub-oak thicket. This set his head throbbing again. Dazed for a few minutes, he was compelled to be still while Wanda rushed on.

Warned by the menacing thunder of hoofs from the west, Jed sprang to action, seeking a place to stretch the rope across the trail. He found a good spot none too soon, and had scarcely tied the rope from scrub-oak to scrub-oak about knee high to a horse when two riders shot around a curve and surged onward like a flood.

With Greg Williams' Colt in his fist, Jed crouched against the dark earth. He saw a third rider trailing the two in the lead by some fifty feet, and behind him, a fourth man. This formation was bad for Jed's purpose, for the two who were behind the leaders were sure to avoid the trap, and equally sure to make things hot for the young cowpuncher.

Closer, closer, pounded the two in the lead. Jed identified Fred and Doug, riding bareback, at the instant their straining horses struck the rope. A singing sound, a loud snap. Horses squealed and men swore, and, with a resounding thud, two men and their mounts piled up in a heap. The rope had done its work well. At least for the moment, Jed need not worry about those two.

Hornton, behind, warned of the trap, dropped his quirt, drew his gun and set his horse back on its haunches. Because he had no saddle, he almost slid over its withers and head, as Jed fired and missed. In the next fraction of a second, Hornton had landed on his feet and put his horse between himself and Jed.

Under its neck and over its back, he fired at the young cowpuncher. Haphazard shooting, which netted nothing. However, Jed couldn't get an open shot at him, and now, out of the tangle of kicking, squealing horses, rose Fred, whom Jed had slugged earlier today at the box stall door.

Jed had Fred in the corner of his eye, saw him triggering his gun, and felt the slug which ripped into his body. Instantly it sickened and weakened him. Yet Jed coolly turned his own weapon on Fred. Another bullet screamed past his head as he squeezed trigger, and the tall renegade leaped like a wounded deer. Falling, he fired two wild shots before he hit the ground and relaxed.

This fight had given Hornton his chance. Possibly Hornton, wild with rage, wished to beat Jed to death. At any rate, when Jed could again give him his attention, Hornton was almost upon him, coming in fast with his Colt raised high for a chopping, downward stroke.

JED never knew how he dodged the blow and tripped Horton. In that instant, as if through a haze of his ebbing strength, the young cowboy saw the L K cook plunge into the fight, with his gun roaring.

Jed threw two bullets at the cook. These stopped the man, but Jed hadn't time to do more, or to see how badly the cook was hurt, before Hornton was up and again lunging at him.

Hornton's clubbed Colt knocked the weapon from Jed's hand, and Hornton's left fist sent a blow to Jed's chest which knocked him three feet backward. Yet Jed did not go down. Bells were ringing in his head and his vision was bad.

That bullet had pretty nearly done for him, he knew. But he had one clear, vivid thought:

"If this brutal killer gets away from me now, he'll overtake Wanda. That must not happen."

Again Hornton was winging the gun. Jed ducked and sent his fist to the man's stomach, the weight of his body behind it. Hornton doubled forward like a jack-knife, and Jed pressed home his advantage, slugging the man's face. Rallying, Hornton swung his Colt around, and as Jed felt it pressed against his side, he caught the weapon's barrel and by sheer force twisted it away as Hornton pressed trigger. Pressed trigger, and sent a bullet into his own body at point-blank range.

Hornton staggered wildly. The gun slipped from his fingers. He choked on an oath and fell.

Slowly, dizzily, Jed picked up the Colt and looked around. The fallen horses had at last scrambled to their feet and scooted to one side. Hornton's mount and the ranch cook's were running toward home. The cook had toppled over, and where the pile-up had occurred lay Doug's figure.

Jed reckoned he must tie those fellows, if they weren't dead, but—but—getting awful dark and he couldn't—couldn't. . . .

Jed didn't know whether or not he was

dreaming. He thought he heard a sweet feminine voice, which should mean something to him, ask:

"Will he live, Doctor? Will he get well?"

"Stop worrying, Wanda," a gruff, yet kindly voice answered. "The bullet went straight through him. It's a clean wound. You can't kill one of these knot-headed cowpunchers."

"He isn't a knot-headed cowpuncher. He's the finest and bravest man you ever doctored."

Jed came wide awake. He wasn't dreaming. He was in a neat bed with sheets on it, in a neat little room in a new log cabin. It must be a girl's room. That sweet, concerned voice had been Wanda's. It must be her room.

He lifted his arms, tried to get up, fell back against the pillow. No strength in him, and he felt queer. But, by gollies, he was alive!

He heard a heavy step and the ring of spurs in the room beyond.

"How's he doin', Wanda?" asked a deep voice he remembered.

"I'm so glad you've come back, Mr. Williams. Jed hasn't regained consciousness yet. Doctor Jones says not to worry, but—"

"Then don't worry, my dear," said Greg Williams. "I'll take a look."

Jed lifted his head an inch and blinked his eyes at the old cowman as he stepped into the room.

"Did—it come out all right, Mr. Williams?"

"Yep, son. Thanks to you and Wanda. A bunch of town men had joined up with the settlers and when Wanda got to 'em they were all ready to move on my outfit and scalp me. After that—well, yuh should have seen the man-hunt for L K King and the rest of his crew! They got King, too, and I'll give yuh one guess what them settlers and townites done with him. Some of L K's men high-tailed and got plumb away. They'll never be back."

"What were you doin' while the settlers got King?"

WILLIAMS stepped close to the bed and gazed down quietly at the young cowboy.

"Me? I heard the fight yuh got into, and I flogged myself that way. Got there too late to help you . . . Right fittin' yuh should even scores with Hornton . . . Doug had a broken neck. Yuh'd fixed the cook and Fred . . . I quick stopped yore bleedin', then at Ox Bow Nate's place Wanda and I got a wagon and put yuh in it. She insisted yuh be brought here to her home. Seemed like she was set on nursin' yuh."

Williams stopped talking and grinned at Jed. Jed grinned back.

"Yuh're thinkin' it's soft for me, eh? Will there be peace here now?"

"Doggoned right. The L K's heirs'll likely sell out—to settlers. Me, I've found out I kind of like settlers like we got here, specially Wanda Young . . . Son, I'd shore like to have you for a cowhand, but—" Williams chuckled—"mebbe yuh'll take up a claim yoreself, right next to Wanda's. It's a thought, son. Better rest some more now and sleep on it."

The cowman went out, and Jed saw Wanda at the door. Their eyes met.

"I never figgered to settle down," he thought, "but ain't she a darlin'! Shore I'll think about what Williams said."

"Freeze, Steele! And Don't Try One of Them Show-Off Gun-Draws of Yores, Either!"

BUD NORTHCUTT'S voice was sharp and threatening. He had Sheriff Blue Steele dead to rights. The outlaw grinned as he said: "Fact is, you won't ever draw again on anybody. I don't hanker to kill you—but you better stick your Colt-grabbers in that fire! Yuh'll be a has-been, and every time yuh look at yore hands yuh'll remember yuh were outsmarted. Go ahead, sizzle yore hands!"

"Then I've got a choice," said Sheriff Steele. "Burns—or a bullet." His mind was racing as he sought a way to get out of this terrible spot—one of the many tough spots he's in when he goes on the trail of a rustling crew in SHORT HORSE AND LONG COLT, the smashing Painted Post novelet by Tom Gunn in the next issue! It's a humdinger featuring Sheriff Steele and Deputy Watts at their fightin', lawin' best!

Swish! Ham's dog-loop slashes upward and circles Mr. Half Breed's scrawny neck

HAM'S ROUND-EYED WOLF

By ALFRED L. GARRY

The lawmen of Sweetgrass buck lobos more treacherous than the four-legged, squinty-eyed variety, and harder to catch!

ME AND my deputy, Ham, now have so much money that we can throw away a half-smoked, ten-cent cigar and never even notice where it lands. The reward money is good salve for the various and sundry bruises we get in collecting a hoot-owl, who was slicker than a buffalo calf's nose, and his confederate, "The Ripper," a stock slaughtering varmint.

Every cow range is at one time or another plagued by a bad stock-killing wolf. From the frenzied kills he makes, our wolf gets called The Ripper. When the local waddies can't collect his scalp, the hard hit ranchers get mad, and then downright panicky. The Association puts up a reasonable reward, then notches it up from time to time to entice famous wolfers. But The Ripper outsmarts them all.

"Four cows outa this herd last night!"

Ham exclaims, unmounting beside a carcass. "The Ripper's a wanton killer!"

There's no mistaking the sign. Me an' Ham see where The Ripper stalks the cow, skulking from cover to cover, slowly and carefully. There's the sudden heaved-up footprints where the bloodthirsty lobo makes its final savage dash. His slashing fangs rip open the cow's throat. The cow, its jugular vein spouting, panics wildly a few paces, weakens quickly, staggers, sags to its knees, then collapses, kicking in a welter of blood.

"Ham," I point out, "look at her full udder. Like the others, her calf musta been about ready to wean. Where'n the devil are the unbranded dogies?"

Me an' Ham ride in circles, listening for the bawling dogies, and at the same time keeping our eyes open for their carcasses. No luck.

"The flitter-ears coulda been adopted by other cows," I surmise.

"Could be." Ham tugs his mustache in deep puzzlement. "But, Egg, do yuh realize that no rancher has bellyached about lobo-slashed calves!"

We no more than get back to Sweetgrass and hoist our spurs on our desks, when a committee of grim-mouthed ranchers clump in.

"Sheriffs," Carl Saunders, chairman of the Cattlemen's Association says, "there ain't much lawin' to be done in Sweetgrass. Instead of sittin' on yore saddle parts here in the office, we think yuh should be puttin' in yore time huntin' down The Ripper."

"No dice!" Ham clips with a vehemence that rocks Saunders back on his heels. "We were elected as peace officers. Not predatory hunters. Our duty is right here in Sweetgrass."

"The sheriff is right," Pete Markio speaks up, smooth as a tallowed eight-strand. "Far away huntin', and the law here, they do not mix."

I RUN my eye over Markio. He's a half-breed from the Dakota badlands. Tall, wiry, with a hooked Sioux nose between basalt-hard eyes. He's got the sprung legs of a horse-Injun. But from the blood and matted hair on his sharp-roweled spurs, he ain't no lover of horseflesh. All his brandmarks point to a cruel mean streak. But no yellow, if them four notches in his low-slung cutter butt ain't faked. My guess is that they ain't.

Markio drifted into Sweetgrass about two years back with a poke of cash money. He bought the old McMillian spread, and must be plenty cow-wise. Already Markio has given us trouble. He's suspected of cutting fences so's his fast growing herds can graze on other outfits' grass.

"We only asked it as a favor," Saunders remarks.

He knows Ham is within his rights in refusing to go out wolf hunting. But what he can't understand, and what puzzles me, is Markio siding in with Ham.

As the grumbling cattlemen get to the hitching rack, Markio's bronc shys as he's about to toe stirrup. Snarling, the mean tempered breed drives a savage boot into the bronc's belly. Ham's hands grip the corners of his desk until the knuckles turn white. He half rises, then forces himself back into his chair.

The spooked mount rears, its forefeet pawing. Markio, his dark face livid with rage, jerks infuriated on his cruel spade bit. A pawing hoof grazes his shoulder. Mouthing c u r s e s, the enraged breed claws out his cutter, pistol-whipping the bronc about the head. The lunging, frantic horse screams in shrill terror.

That's fulminate of mercury to Ham. He explodes out of his chair. His driving boots carry him through the doorway like a cannon ball. He caroms into the tall breed, knocking him reeling into the dust.

"Get up!" Ham blares. "In these parts, we don't savage our broncs!"

My pardner's in a gun crouch, short legs spraddled, shoulders hunched, and hands quivering over the butts of his guns. The startled breed in the dust, who's still got his gun in his hand, rises slowly, cursing Ham in a steady monotone.

"Cut it!" Ham snaps. "Either use yore gun, or get it outa yore hand!"

The air is tense. The Association committee sit in their saddles rigid as bronze statues. Ham's got two strikes on himself. All Markio has to do is tip his muzzle and slip the hammer. Ham's got to clear leather to get off his shot.

"Yuh heard me!" Ham's voice is edged with brittle lightning. "Shoot! Or drop that gun!"

The breed, his gun still lowered, takes a backward step. His eyes waver.

"Drop it!" Ham commands, sensing the man's uncertainty.

Markio's gun plops into the dust. The tense men relax. I settle back in my chair. Ham turns easy toward Markio's quivering wild-eyed mount. He commences to make low, soothing noises deep in his throat. Gently, Ham reaches toward the horse's neck, patting it tenderly, his voice reassuring the badly spooked animal.

"Watch out!"

Markio, who had been edging closer, suddenly leaps on Ham like a treacherous puma. His driving knuckles smash against Ham's unsuspecting jaw. My pardner reels against the hitching rack. He throws both arms around the rail to keep from falling. The berserk breed swarms over my groggy deputy, lashing unrelenting fists into his unprotected face. Ham's head bobs like a Hallowe'en apple in a tub.

I can't butt in. Ham never should have turned his back on the snake. Markio can always say he elected to make it a knuckle fight instead of gunplay. It's Ham's fault he's sagging on the hitching rack like a punch-groggy prizefighter helpless on the ropes.

With his left, Markio paws Ham's battered head, turning his defenseless jaw just the way he wants it. The breed steps back, lowering his right fist to his boot top. The fist commences to whizz toward Ham's jaw.

"Duck!" Ham! Duck! I scream, dashing from the office.

Ham must have heard my frantic yell. His head lolls drunkenly. Markio checks his blow in midair. Again, he savagely paws Ham's head into position, and winds up his right. I scoop a hat full of water from the hoss trough, sloshing it on Ham.

"No! No!"

Markio's squaw suddenly pops up outa nowhere to swarm all over me, her clawed fingernails raking my face. Like a catamount, she commences to climb my frame.

"Keep outa this Egg!" Saunders warns, reaching down from his saddle, and pulling off the screaming squaw. "It's Ham's fight."

THE dull haze swims out of Ham's eyes. He shakes his head like a hard-busted steer, then his dumpy frame sags against the hitching rack. The water ain't done him no good. He's too badly beat. Ham's got to take his licking.

Markio twists my deputy's head the way he wants it, steps back, lowers his unnecessary guard, and winds up his right for the Sunday punch. I turn my head, hoping my ears won't hear the wicked spat of the breed's bony knuckles on Ham's jaw.

Instead, I hear a sudden startled gasp from the crowd. Then a soggy plop. I whirl.

Foxy Ham! The water did too fetch him around! He's drove his head like a billy goat into the wide-open breed, knocking him off balance. He follows it with a looping roundhouse haymaker. The downward sweep catches Markio on the temple. His knees sag. Ham pivots on his heel, putting all he's got into a pistoning left to the breed's breadbasket.

The wind leaves Markio with a, "Ohugh!" He jackknifes in the middle. Ham lets him have a wicked rabbit punch with the heel of his hand as he goes down.

The breed grovels in the dust, fighting for his wind in great, sucking draughts. Ham reaches over, jerks him erect. He slaps him across the face with the back of his hand.

"How much for the bronc?" he demands. "I ain't havin' yuh take out yore dirty spleen on it when yuh get outa sight!"

The stunned breed mumbles something.

"Twenty-five bucks, yuh say?" Ham clips. "Here, Egg, give this hairpin his money."

Well, Ham's got me over a barrel. I can't sidehill before the cheering crowd. So I fork over twenty-five dollars, and add it to the other dinero Ham owes me.

The breed snatches the money. Mouthing curses under his breath, Markio strips his saddle and other hoss-gear from the trembling bronc, throws them into his squaw's buckboard, and drives out of town.

"Lawmen, step over to Freddie's Bar, an' I'll buy yuh a drink," old man Saunders says, echoing the sentiments of the other ranchers who don't like Markio.

"If it's all right with yuh," Ham mumbles, twisting his puffed lips into a grin, "I think yuh'd better treat me to a beefsteak for my black eyes."

Ham's eyes are just about clearing up when a queer looking dude comes to the office. He's lugging enough guns to start a Mexican revolution. The young fellow introduces himself very pleasant-

like, his eyes twinkling behind thick spectacles and his fine teeth gleaming like a fresh painted picket fence. Says his name is Teddy Roosterfoot, or something like that, that he's a naturalist, and has a big stockranch in the Dakotas.

"I've come to have a try at your stock killing wolf," he tells us. "We had one like it in Dakota. As a naturalist, I'm much interested. Because the killing characteristics of your wolf is the same as ours."

"Did yuh ever see it?" Ham asks.

"Once, at night," the dude tells us. "That's why I won't be satisfied until it is collected."

"No man here's even seen it," Ham tells him. "The Ripper is too smart for the local boys, the professional wolfers, an' me an' Egg."

Ham says the last as though The Ripper must have diplomas from forty colleges to be smarter than us.

Roosterfoot, or whatever his name is, hires Ham to guide him. With a cook and chuckwagon, they disappear into the hills. Two weeks later, they are back.

"What kind of a trip did yuh have?" I ask.

"Bully! Simply bully!" Teddy says, flashing his company front teeth in a bright smile that crinkles his eyes pleasant. "We collected elk, mountain goat, and grizzly."

"Get a shot at The Ripper?" I ask.

"Nary a sight of him," Ham speaks up, proud as a mama hen. "But this here dude," he waves his hand toward Teddy, "he's learned me plenty about stalkin'. Me, who's hunted buffaler an' been hunted by Injuns all over the prairie, has learned a new thing or two about creepin' up on game."

"Say," Teddy says, suddenly changing the subject, "who's that hombre?"

HIS head nods toward Markio, who's mogging down the street.

"A breed from out in yore territory," Ham tells him. "Bought a good-size ranch here."

"About two years ago?" Teddy inquires. "His herds growing very fast?"

"Yep," Ham nods. "Why?"

"Oh nothing," Teddy says. "But now I want that Ripper wolf more than ever. Here, I'll write you a check for a thousand dollars to be added to the reward."

"Why?" Ham asks.

"I told you I glimpsed the stock killing wolf we had in Dakota." Teddy's eyes are downright serious behind his glasses. "It was at night. The pupils of his eyes gleamed like *round* diamonds!"

"Round?" Ham questions.

"Round!" Teddy nods. "Yes, round!"

After we'd posted the additional reward, Ham returns to the office and commences to suck the end of a short pencil like a lollypop. Gulching his brows, he humps over his desk, writing a letter. I try to get a look at it over his shoulder. But Ham's as secretive as a Hopi medicine man brewing up a charm. He covers the letter, grins, and jerks his thumb toward the door.

"We'll be needin' some fresh ca'tridges, Egg," he says. "Hand loads are all right for target shootin'. But from now on we may be huntin' some powerful smart game. Perhaps two-legged!"

"Who?" I pry.

"Aw, run along," Ham joshes. "Skidoo!"

I'm worried. Ham's throwed in that about ca'tridges for a blind. He's foxy, and he's flighty. How do I know he ain't writin' to one of them matrimonial bureaus? Come to think of it, Ham's been awful critical of my cooking lately.

From behind Freddie's batwings, I watch Ham drop the letter in the post office slot. Like a waddie spearing pickles from a pickle barrel, I fish the letter from the mailbox with a pin on a stick.

"What the devil!" I ejaculate, reading the address.

Now, what'n tarnation is Ham writing the warden of the Deer Lodge prison for?

Ham sticks close to the post office, and a few days later gets a package, which he hugs to him like a Injun conjurer's bag. He mounts up, rides out of town, and in a few hours is back again.

"Egg," he says. "Throw yore possibles on a pack-hoss. We're goin' huntin'!"

"Wolf?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Sorta," Ham sidehills.

A few miles out of town, Ham turns us down to the river, and commences to build a deadfall trap. The next morning there's a skunk in the trap with his head crushed. Death was so sudden, he didn't have time to get his tail in action. Ham cuts out the stink gland, and drains

the sticky yellow fluid into a bottle.

"Now what?" I want to know.

"We'll be associatin' with a skunk," Ham says mysteriously, "an' we may want to smell plumb congenial."

I see Ham sneak the package from the post office, which he'd ditched near our campsite, into his possible bag. We head way up into the Bear Paw Mountains and at last leave our mounts in a deserted blind canyon corral. Ham opens his warbag, and taking out the package, opens it.

"Faded, washed-out convict suits!" I gasp. "What's the idear?"

"Somethin' I learned from that Teddy feller," Ham says. "He was four-eyed an' had to stalk his game close. Wore a a daubed up jumper suit, somethin' like these. Here, I'll put mine on. Then yuh give me a five minute start."

Ham sticks some sage-brush and twigs in the convict cap, daubs his face with yellow clay, and slips on a pair of Injun moccasins. He stoops low, and dodges around a boulder. I wait five minutes, and then set out after him.

Well, sir, I ain't no babe in the woods when it comes to reading sign and trailing. But Ham's just vanished. I sit down, and look over every piece of landscape careful. No Ham.

Then he chuckles, and gets up. He'd been hunkered against a cliff wall, not over fifty feet away. But that washed-out convict outfit broke up his outlines so that he blended with the shadow-dappled rocks perfect.

"If I'd been an Apache, I'd had yore hair!" Ham jeers. "Now will yuh play it my way?"

"Gimme that other convict suit," I grumble. "But who are we goin' to play hide an' seek with?"

I FEEL foolisher than a waddy caught drinking sodie water at a temperance picnic in that convict suit and hat with the dried grass on it like a woman's bonnet. But not for long. Ham's leading the way. And if I don't mind my P's and Q's, he just blends into the landscape. I got a heck of a time keeping him in sight. The lummox just delights in giving me the slip, and then scaring the wits outa me with a "boo!" when I get close.

We top a rise, shoving our heads around the base of a boulder, just as though we were scouting for hostile Injuns. Below us spreads Grass Valley, a pretty meadow, knee deep with tender cured bufialo grass. Great stuff for growing beef-packing frames on calves. There's a big herd of Rainbow C over S she-stock and and their flitter-ears grazing in the valley.

"Almost weaners," I observe. "With The Ripper about, Saunders should have a couple of waddies tending his stock.

"We're them," Ham says. "Keep yore head down."

Ham studies the valley and the cliffs through the glasses until his eyes ache. Then he hands them to me.

"Get the lay of the land," he says. "We may have to do some night scoutin'. And at the same time, keep yore eye peeled on the western rim."

Shore enough, late in the afternoon, I catch a flash of low sun on concha far across the valley. I swing my glasses over. A lone horseman is sizing up the herd from between two boulders.

"Got company," I remarks, shaking Ham out of his snooze.

"Yeah." Ham rubs the sleep from his eyes. "Make out who?"

"No," I say. "He's not showin' himself."

"Good." Ham nods. "Better get yoreself some shut-eye. We'll likely have a bit of night work."

Like a porkypine with a stomach full of garden sass, Ham curls up. Soon his snores are mingling with the sigh of the evening breeze in the pines. I sleep fitful. At ten, I wake Ham.

"It's good an' dark," I whisper. "Shouldn't we get goin'?"

"Nope," Ham grunts. "Nope."

Well, it's his show. So I drift off to sleep. The slim moon is low in the west when Ham shakes me awake.

"Listen!" he whispers.

From below in the valley comes the muffled stirring of an uneasy herd. A cow bellers. There's a short flurrying beat of hooves. The cow's beller chokes off in a horrible, strangling cough.

"The Ripper!" I ejaculate, slipping off the safety of my .30-30. "Come on!"

"Hold yore hosses!" Ham lays his hand on my shoulder. "Follow me."

Ham's had a peculiar hen on the nest. But he's acting awfully darned funny to bring off the hatch. I'm all for sifting down into the valley and trying to put a slug into The Ripper. His hide's worth plenty. But Ham's actions are

just like a feller going away and leaving his change on the bar.

For a hairpin as dinero minded as Ham, he's acting plumb locoed. He makes no effort to stalk down toward The Ripper. Instead, he leads me at a fast pace over the ridges, across the creek, and up the canyon wall on the other side. The moon sets. Before we flop down at the top of the rimrocks, the pale glow of false dawn is lighting up the high peaks. Just below us, I make out a worn cattle trail that leads from the sheltered grass valley to the higher benches.

From around his middle, Ham commences to uncoil his slim eight-strand rawhide lariat, his best rodeo one that he worked a whole winter to make. He opens the loop on the ground behind him, practicing a few quick-switch throws to the cattle trail below.

"This is goin' to be awful, Egg," Ham says, and grinning, pulls out the bottle of skunk scent.

Awful ain't the word for it! Ham sprinkles the scent on the ground around us. It stinks like a whole convention of skunks. Whatever Ham's laying for with his catch-rope shore ain't going to be able to pick up our human scent as it comes up that cattle trail.

There's a scrabbling of hooves on the trail gravel. Three badly spooked calves, their terrified eyes rolling, and white spume dripping from their muzzles, come panicking up the trail. Ham's fingers tremble with excitement as he readies his lariat.

My heart beats faster. For behind the weaners, harrying their heels like a trained cattle dog, is The Ripper. I know it's him. His muzzle is red with gore. But he ain't like any wolf I've seen in these parts. Too leggy.

SUDDENLY The Ripper braces its forefeet. He throws up his pointed muzzle. Suspiciously, he cast for the strange scent mingled with that of the skunk.

Ham twitches his loop. The Ripper springs back. Too late! Ham's twine has dabbed his neck. Ham jerks the noose tight. We got him! I jerk my cutter.

"No noise!" Ham cautions fiercely. His arms are jerking as the snarling wolf fights the strangling noose. "Knife!"

I heave my bowie with an overhand cast. The hurtling blade thuds against the wolf's chest, burying itself to the hilt. The Ripper sags against the rope, rolls on his side, plumb dead.

Ham slides down the rock wall to the trail, rushes to the dead cattle killer, and pushes back an eyelid.

"Yep," he grunts.

"'Yep', what?" I ask, mighty puzzled.

"Yep, our work's only half done," Ham replies. "Keep them flitter-ears stampeding up the draw. Travel like a ghost."

We light out, stooping low, skulking from shadow to shadow. Our striped convict suits in the pale light of the rosy dawn blend into the eroded sandstone. It's no trick to keep the dogies moving up the draw. But I can't see what the Sam Hill Ham's up to.

Suddenly Ham stops, warning me to join him carefully. I peek around a boulder. On a little mesa there's a covered wagon. Near it, Pete Markio is sitting his bronc. As the calves bust onto the mesa, he builds his loop and dabs his twine on the leading dogie. He busts and hog-ties it in rodeo time. In darned few minutes, he's got all three of the calves hog-tied, gagged with a stick and piggin' string, and hoisted into his covered wagon.

"That's why we never found the calves!" I'm flabbergasted. "The Ripper was a trained wolf! When Markio rustled weaners, he never left a mother cow alive to bawl for her calf."

"It's about all the evidence we need," Ham whispers.

Now, I see why we wore these landscape blending outfits. We commence stalking toward Markio like a spotted jaguar stalks a doe. Working from cover to cover, we soon are within easy pistol range of the unsuspecting breed.

"Reach, Markio!" I bark, laying back the ears of my cutters, and stepping out from a sun-dappled rock.

The startled breed jerks around. His lean hand streaks hipward. Ham's cutter barks. Markio rocks in his saddle as Ham's slug slams into his holstered gun.

"None of that!" Ham clips. "Get 'em up and—"

He don't finish. A sudden shotgun blasts from behind the covered wagon. Birdshot stings us cruel.

Markio ducks behind the wagon.

"The other barrel's got buckshot!" he shouts. "Drop yore guns!"

His squaw steps from behind the wagon, a double-gun leveled at our middles. The breed follows with a rifle. No feller in his right mind takes a chance on having a buckshot window blowed in him. So me an' Ham let our guns clatter to the ground. The dawn's chilly, but we're sweating copious.

"Where's my dog?" Markio's eyes slit. "Where is he?"

"Dog?" I question.

"Shore," Ham says out of the side of his mouth. "A German Shepherd that looks mighty like a lobo. Markio trained him to slaughter cows and run the calves to his covered wagon."

"Where's my dog?" Markio bellows again, his limbs trembling on the hammer of the cocked rifle.

"He ain't rustlin' any more," Ham says.

With a piercing shriek, the squaw throws up her gun. As she pulls the trigger, Markio side-swipes the barrel with his gun. The charge whistles harmlessly over our heads.

"Fool!" he cries. "We do not want to kill these men that way!"

"They have killed our Mafekeg!" the squaw laments. "Kill them!"

"But not fast," Markio replies. "Slow! That's the way for them to die."

"In the hole?"

I don't know what hole the squaw means. But from the savage, gloating expression on her wrinkled face, I know it will be a slow and a cruel death. A shivering gap-wind chills my spine.

MARKIO and his squaw herd us over a rocky spur and into a small box canyon. At the far end, in a grove of lodgepole pines, is an ancient Blackfoot burial grounds. We pass it, and skirt a dry creek bed.

We're skirting the circular opening of a deep pothole when Markio suddenly spurs his mount, jerking it sideways. The bronc slams into us, knocking us into the pothole.

I land on top of Ham. Which is to say his blubber breaks my fall. He scrambles to his feet, rubbing his elbow, and shaking the fuzz from his head. Above, the savage, diabolical laughtes of Markio's squaw echoes and reechoes from the canyon walls.

She knows we're goners!

There's no chance of climbing out of the pothole with it's inward-sloping, polished, basalt walls. Our prison is shaped like a milk bottle with a broad base, narrowing up to the bottle-like neck in the canyon floor through which we were dropped.

"Well, Ham," I mumble, "I guess this is it."

"Oh—oops!" Ham groans, toeing something from the dust. "An' we ain't the first!"

It is a grinning Injun skull!

"A Blackfoot execution hole!" I gasp. "Warriors who showed a yellow streak in battle were shoved in here to die a slow and terrible death."

"There shore was no escape," Ham mumbles, his toe turning up a couple more skulls and a mess of Injun relics.

We hear a scrabbling on the rocks above. Markio's thin, evil face leers down at us.

"I'm addin' one more dog," he gloats. "It'll keep yuh nice stinkin' company!"

With that he tumbles the dead body of his cattle-killing dog into the hole. We're in a pretty fix. The hole is stuffy and hot now. What will it be when the dog's carcass commences to rot? I sit with my back against the wall, trying to drive the thoughts of how revolting our death is going to be from my aching head.

Ham is down on his hands and knees, sifting the dust of the floor through his fingers. He carefully examines each Injun relic he turns up.

"No dice." I shake my head wearily. "Yuh won't find nothin' worthwhile. Injuns always broke in two the weapons they buried with criminals sentenced to die. They wanted him to starve in the Happy Hunting Grounds."

"Yeah," Ham says, turning an owlish expression toward me. "Yeah, but two and two can make four. We may be able to piece somethin' together."

Just to be doing something, I join in the search. We don't find a single thing that can be made into a weapon. I finger a small piece of very sharp flint. Some ancient warrior's razor.

"Well—"

Ham don't finish it, but I know what he's thinking. We can use it to escape—one way. When the torture of thirst, hunger, and the stench of that dead dog gets too much, we can leave. Bleeding to death from slashed wrists will be better than the screaming torture of insanely trying to climb the polished basalt walls of our death trap.

Ham kneels beside the dead dog. Again, he prys open its eye, studying it.

"That naturalist, Teddy, from the Dakotas, shore would be interested in this," Ham says. "He put me on the right track."

"How?"

"Remember," Ham commences, "how he came to hunt a lobo that killed our cattle the same way cattle had been killed in Dakota two years back. Then, how he thought he recognized Markio as a hairpin who'd once been a neighbor. And, finally, what he said about one time gettin' a glimpse of the cattle-killin' wolf by moonlight."

"Not a glimpse," I puts in. "He just said its eyes gleamed in the moonlight like round diamonds."

"Yep." Ham commences to count items off on his fingers. "How about wolves? Who ever heard of a wolf fang-slashin' a cow's neck? Lobos hamstring and drag down their prey. Then it just wasn't possible for any wolf, no matter how smart, to pass up all the poisoned baits set out for The Ripper. But a dog can be trained to ignore all food, no matter how tempting, and eat only from the hand of one person."

Ham finger-curries his scalp, and goes on.

"The way only full-uddered cows were killed, and we found darned few bawlin' calves, always did point to a snake in the grass. Teddy describin' the wolf's eyes as round, just cinched my suspicions."

"How?" I want to know.

"Well," Ham says, forgetting the awful pickle we're in and puffing out his chest proudful, "not even many of the high muck-a-muck naturalists know that the only bodily difference between the wolf family and the dog family is that dogs have round eye pupils, while the pupils of a wolf's eyes are oval and slanted like a Chinaman's."

"Havin' nice time?"

We look up. Grinning in the opening and jeering at our misery, is Markio's vengeful squaw. The butter of civilization is spread mighty thin on her, and is melting off fast. She's enjoying with savage Injun delight the slow death that's gnawing away at our sanity.

AS THE days pass, her mocking taunts get more and more maddening. Every few hours, she pokes her ugly, wrinkled face into the opening and tortures us with savage abuse. Our nerves string taut as a fiddle string. Ham fingers the flint razor.

"Not yet," I soothe. "We can stand that dead cur a few days longer."

Suddenly, Ham leaps at the dog's body.

"Egg, we're fools!" he cries. "Here, help me!"

Now, I got to humor Ham. He commences to skin that dead dog. It's hard work with that flint razor, but we finally get him peeled. Ham spreads the hide on the floor and carefully fleshes it. Then, after being so careful not to nick it, Ham does the darnedest thing.

He cuts a small hole in the exact center of the hide. Then, round and round the hole he commences dragging the flint, cutting a narrow spiral strip of the raw hide.

"A rope!" I cry, catching on. "Let me help!"

It is plumb tedious. The flint razor dulls. We've got to spend hours rubbing it sharp again on a stone. When the cackling squaw pokes her head in the opening to jibe at us, we cover our work with our bodies. Finally, we get it done, eighty or a hundred feet of thin, dog-hide string.

Ham cuts the strand into four equal pieces. His short, thick fingers fly as he braids the slippery hide into a thin rope.

"How'll that help us?" I suddenly look around. "There ain't a knob or a projection of any kind we can slip the rope around to haul ourselves up."

"Nope," Ham grunts, not looking up from his work. "I ain't aimin' to haul us out."

You know, folks, I'm commencing to think the prospect of the terrible death staring us in the face has sorta taken the lid off Ham. He's beginning to act downright loco.

My pardner takes off his belt. Worrying off the brass buckle, he prys out the tongue, and uses it for a honda, making a catch-rope out of the stranded dog-hide. He commences making casts with the slippery, limber thing. When he gets the feel of it, he starts twitching it overhead, upward into the opening of our prison.

Ham ain't won the calf-roping contest at the Sweetgrass Rodeo for three years straight for nothing. Soon he's got the thing down pat. He can flirt that limber dog-strand up through the narrow bottle-

neck of our rock cell quicker than the dart of a lizzard's tongue.

I don't take much interest. My mind's getting a little hazy, and my tongue is beginning to thicken with thirst. I'm hungry, too. But I ain't starved enough to want to eat any of that dead dog, which is stinking higher than an Injun village garbage dump.

We hear the dull thudding of hooves. Ham puts his ear to the rock wall, listening intently.

"One bronc," he mutters, a grim grin forming under his drooped mustache. "Good."

Ham picks up his dog-strand and steps far back into the shadows. The jeering squaw peers down at us.

"Thirsty?" she mocks. "Want water?"

She has two battered tin pans. Cackling with fiendish glee, she starts to torture us by pouring clear, cold water from one pan to the other. And is that torture! I grip my fists until the nails bite into the palms. I've got to keep my self control. But, oh, how I want a sip of that water!

"Give her an act," Ham whispers hoarsely, his suffering tongue barely able to form the words. "Get right under the hole and plead. Plead for that water like a lost soul in hades!"

To humor Ham, I extend my arms like a desert-maddened prospector dying of thirst. I beg with cracked lips and thickened tongue for a drink—a sip—just a single drop of that water. Folks, it ain't all acting, either.

My suffering delights the heartless savage. She howls with fiendish glee. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ham fingering his dog-strand loop. And then I catch on. We'll only get one try!

Tears roll down my face, as I beseech the squaw for just a drop. She leans lower in the hole, dipping a finger in the water, and letting a maddening, tantalizing drop splash on my pitiously upraised hands. In her devilish enjoyment, she leans farther ito the hole.

Swish!

Ham's loop leaps upward like a rattler's strike. The noose circles her outstretched arm. Ham jerks, swinging his weight on the rope. The screaming squaw tumbles into our death trap. In no time we've got her gagged and trussed, and are taking sparse swigs from the canteen that tumbled in with her.

"What'll we do now?"

"Wait," Ham says, and grins. "We're shore to have company."

HE'S right. About dusk, Markio, who's missed his squaw, shoves his sinister face into the opening above us.

"Seen my woman?" he demands.

"Yep," Ham replies. "She's down here with us. Look for yourelf."

"What?"

Markio can't believe his ears. He gets down on his hands and knees at the edge of the pothole, and lowers his head into the opening. That shore is his mistake!

Swish!

Ham's dog-loop slashes upward, circles his scrawny neck. Ham heaves, and Mr. Half Breed comes to call on us. We swarm on him like a hive of yellarjackets, and truss him up good with the hide of his own dog. Ham throws his six-guns, bowie, and stock knife out of the hole.

"What the tarnation's the idear?" I demand.

Then the sudden realization of our plight freezes the marrow of my bones. *We ain't no better off than we were be-*

[*Turn page*]

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Advt.)

fore! How are we going to get out?

"Take off yore boots, Egg," Ham says.

"Aw, now." I commence to buck like a bay steer. "I'm cashin' in like I lived. With my boots on!"

"Naw, yuh ain't!" Ham grins. "Yuh are goin' to climb a tree. A human tree!"

Ham then whirls on Markio.

"Breed," he snarls, "which way do yuh want it? A slow, lingerin' death in this hole, with the stench of yore dead dog? Or a twenty year stretch at Deer Lodge?"

"It don't take no time for Markio, who is plenty buffaloed, to see the light."

"Twenty years," he mumbles.

"All right, stand up!" Ham commands.

Well, that's how Ham does it. He has Markio stand on his shoulders like an acrobat. The tall breed can reach the wall, just about five feet below the opening. I scramble up Ham's frame, and then more carefully work my way upward until I'm standing on Markio's shoulders.

My clawing fingers can just reach outside the slippery rim of the bottle neck. I find a crack in the stone, dig my fingers in, and heave myself upward. My grip crumbles. I claw wildly, get an elbow hooked over the edge, and swing myself out of the death pit.

I'm drawing great gulps of cool air, when I'm suddenly conscious that all's not well down in the hole.

"Yuh dirty name!" Ham growls. "Yuh will try to kick me in the head, will yuh!"

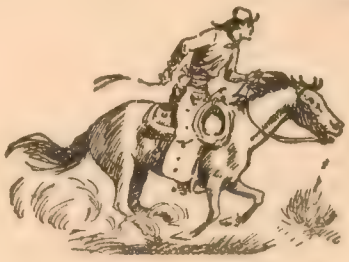
There's grunting. Groaning. And the fast smash of fists on flesh. Then all is silent. A deadly, ominous silence.

"Ham! Ham!" I called excitedly. "Yuh all right?"

"Oh shore." Ham's chuckle rumbles from below. "Take the picket rope off Markio's bronc an' haul up this *good* half breed.

"Good?" I question. "Dead?"

"Nope!" Ham cackles. "Yuh just have to half kill a half breed to make a good Injun outa him!"



Headliners in Our Gala Next Issue

THOSE two intrepid lawmen of Painted Post, Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts, take the trail of a peg-legged outlaw and his gang of rustlers in SHORT HORSE AND LONG COLT, an exciting action-packed novelet by Tom Gunn featured next issue. It's one of the finest of the Painted Post novelets, and a yarn well-worth looking forward to!

* * * * *

HUMAN interest is the keynote of THE NESTER, Barry Scobee's remarkable novelet of pioneer homesteaders. You'll find this story one that will make you proud of the heritage of the West—and it will grip you mightily as you follow its interesting characters through a series of tense and breathless adventures.

* * * * *

A SWIFT-MOVING novelet by Nels Leroy Jorgensen, LAST RIDE FOR THE TOWN-TAMER, follows the exciting exploits of Bob Vidal in a story that races with action, suspense and surprises from the first word to the last. It's packed with pulse-stirring thrills!

* * * * *

BESIDES the foregoing, the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN will bring you many short stories by your favorite authors, plus other interesting features and another entertaining "Home Corral" chat. Be on hand for some swell reading!

Allen gasped as the hornet's nest dropped

LEAD HORNETS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

When Blaze Dawe steals a payroll and casts suspicion on another, he forgets the stinger often gets stung!

THERE were a lot of folks in Sagebrush Valley who figured Tom Allen was a right nice young feller but he would never amount to shucks. He was a fair to middling cowhand who got his job done, but he didn't work himself to death doing it.

"Never did see any reason for hurryin' unless yuh're goin' some place special," Tom Allen often said. "Which same goes for workin' and ridin' hosses—no point to keep goin' at a gallop when time don't mean a thing."

Allen was a husky young waddy with a twinkle in his eyes and a heap more savvy than anyone realized. He had been riding for the Turkey Track for close to two years, and old Lem Garry didn't have any loafers in his outfit. With a foreman like "Blaze" Dawe bossing the men, they did their work or else. Dawe was big and tough and proud of it.

Right from the time Tom Allen joined the outfit he got a mighty clear idea that

the foreman didn't like him. Allen got to wondering if that was because he had shown that he wasn't afraid of Blaze Dawe. Being a new man and the youngest member of the outfit, Allen was just the right party for the foreman to boss around, without any trouble at all.

"You'll do just like I say, and no arguments, Allen," Dawe told the new man.

"Shore, providin' what you say is part of my job," said Allen. He looked at the foreman and grinned. "I'm admittin' that yuh're bigger and a heap uglier than I am, Dawe. I ain't goin' to argue with you none. Me, I'm a peaceful gent."

That was the way it started. From that day on Dawe gave Allen every tough job there was around the spread. If there were fence post holes to be dug on a sweltering hot day, it was Tom Allen the foreman selected to do the digging. When there were barns to be cleaned, Allen was given the job. He even had to chop the wood for the ranch cook's fire.

It was Allen who was sent looking for strays where the brush was thickest. He was ordered to the line camp and left there for weeks longer than the other men who took over the job during the bitter cold winter. The horses in his string were the worst of the cavvy.

That was the way it had gone on for close to two years and Tom Allen had done his work efficiently, but in his own way. Never hurrying, never getting excited, but always getting the job done. He never argued with Dawe. Yet, he knew that the foreman hated him because nothing seemed too tough for him to do.

"I'm expectin' fireworks before this here sityation is over," said Pecos Wilson, one of the oldest waddies in the outfit. "If you-all ask me, Tom Allen is just too dang spiritless to be natural. A box of dynamite is peaceful, too. It sort of sets around, not botherin' nobody. But just let someone get careless with a match. Dawe is goin' to rowel Allen a mite too hard, some day. Then gents, better jump for cover!"

THE winter broke, giving way to milder weather and soon it was time for the first spring gather. Tom Allen was feeling cheerful when Lem Garry came out to the bunkhouse one morning, just after the outfit had finished breakfast. From all appearances the Old Man was in a right chipper mood, too.

"I've been watchin' you boys this past year," Garry said looking at the ten men in his outfit. "Seen some things I liked and some I didn't." The owner of the Turkey Track glanced at Dawe. "For my money a good foreman is one who gets the work done without ridin' roughshod over the men under him."

"Meanin' what, Boss?" Dawe asked.

"That I been noticin' the way yuh been givin' Allen all the tough jobs around here," said the old cattleman, his eyes hard as he stared at the foreman. "I don't like it, Blaze. Looks to me like there's somethin' personal about it. I expect the foreman on this ranch to get along well with all the men in the outfit."

Dawe didn't say anything. He just stood there scowling as Lem Garry swung around and walked back up to the ranchhouse. The Turkey Track was a batchelor outfit, as the owner had never married and had no close kin.

"So you finally did what I figgered yuh would." Dawe glared at Allen. "You went snivelin' to the boss, claimin' I was too hard on yuh."

"That's not true!" Allen said coldly. "Yuh know I didn't say anythin' to the boss, Dawe—and never would."

"Yuh're lyin'," snapped the foreman. "Strikes me that it's just what a yellow coyote like you would do, Allen."

It was right then that Dawe made his big mistake. He lunged forward and lashed out with a big fist that was aimed at Allen's jaw. Allen ducked and the blow slid over his head. As a boy an older brother, who had been in the ring, had taught Tom Allen how to box and he had not forgotten his lessons.

He began to fight, boxing deliberately, easily blocking the foreman's wild sledge-hammer blows. As he defended himself, he remembered the last year or so and, remembering the way Dawe had treated him, he grew suddenly angry. But it was a cold and calculating rage. He closed in and, with skilful fists, gave Blaze Dawe the worst beating the foreman had ever taken.

The fight seemed to go on for hours, yet it was actually over in a matter of a few minutes. Dawe managed to get in some glancing punches, but he was no match for Allen. He had a black eye and a bleeding face very quickly. Then Allen stepped in, landed a right to the body and a left to the chin—the old

"one-two," and Dawe went down. He sprawled there—completely out.

"Dynamite, just like I been sayin'," muttered Pecos Wilson as he stood, witnessing all this with the other men. "Come on, boys, let's get ridin'. We got our own work to do."

They headed for the harness shed, grabbed their rigging, and saddled up at the corral. Allen remained, watching Dawe. When he saw that the foreman was reviving, he followed the others. After he had gotten his gear from the shed, he glanced back. Dawe was on his feet now, just standing there. Allen could almost feel the hate in the foreman's gaze as he stared at the man who had knocked him out.

Allen turned and walked down to the corral. Pecos Wilson had mounted. Now he was sitting in his saddle near the corral gate, waiting for Allen.

"I'd be sort of careful if I was you, Tom," Wilson said as Allen walked by him, heading for the gate. "Dawe ain't a man to take a lickin' and do nothin' about it. Watch out fer trouble."

"I'll be watchin'," said Allen. "Hope this ends it. But if trouble comes I shore ain't dodgin' it."

He roped and saddled a horse from his string. He rode out after the other waddies while Wilson held the gate open for him and then closed it after he'd left the corral.

Allen saw Dawe walking slowly up toward the ranchhouse. Evidently the foreman wanted to talk to the boss about something. Allen wondered if Lem Garry had seen the fight. The Old Man didn't miss much that went on around his spread. He could have been observing matters from a window of the ranchhouse.

AS THE men had their orders to start gathering strays today, Allen and Wilson had been told to work over in the north section. This meant they had to ride by close to the front of the ranchhouse to get there.

"Boss had Dawe bring the payroll money out from the bank in town yesterday evenin'," Pecos Wilson said as they rode. "Reckon we'll get paid when we ride in tonight, seein' this is the first of the month."

"You in such a terrible hurry, Pecos?" said Allen. "Yuh ought to be ashamed. At yore age, too!"

As they rode past the porch, the foreman came through the open front door of the ranchhouse.

"Hey, Allen!" Dawe shouted. "The boss wants to see you right away."

"All right." Allen glanced at Wilson. "You ride on, Pecos. I'll catch up with yuh later."

The old waddy nodded and headed north. Allen halted his horse near the porch and swung out of the saddle. He tied the bay to the hitch rail and went up the steps. Dawe stood in the doorway watching, his battered face expressionless.

"Where's the Old Man?" Allen asked as he walked across the porch.

"In his office."

The foreman stepped to one side to let Allen pass, and then the foreman followed the waddy along the hall. The door of the ranch owner's office was standing half open so Allen walked in. Then he stood motionless, staring.

Lem Garry was seated at his old battered desk, but he was very still and there was blood on his forehead. In front of him was the payroll money arranged in neat little piles on the desk.

"What—"

Allen had started to speak. But before he could voice the question, something hard crashed down on his head. Then everything went black and he dropped to the floor unconscious.

Tom Allen never was sure just how much time elapsed before he again opened his eyes. He was still lying on the floor of the ranch office. He got weakly to his feet, his head throbbing.

He knew it had been Blaze Dawe who had hit him and knocked him out. Now there was no sign of the foreman. Garry was still sitting there in his chair, but the money that had been stacked on the desk was gone.

"Pay for ten men at forty and found," muttered Allen. "Not more than four hundred dollars! And Dawe killed the Old Man for that!" The waddy frowned. "And Dawe called me a yellow coyote!"

Allen stepped closer to the desk. An eerie feeling swept over him as Lem Garry's left arm moved slowly. Then the ranch owner moaned and stirred restlessly in his chair.

Allen's heart leaped! The Old Man was still alive!

"My head—hurts," mumbled Garry, as he finally opened his eyes. "What—

what happened?"

"It was Dawe, boss," said Allen quickly. "He must have banged yuh over the head with his gun butt like he done me. I guess he figgered he'd killed you. He stole the payroll money."

"That's it," said Garry. "I fired him after I saw him pick that fight with you. Told him to get off the ranch. Then he hit me." The owner of the Turkey Track half rose from his chair and then sank back weakly. "Go after him, Tom. Don't let him get away with that money."

"All right, Boss," said Allen. He swung around and headed for the door. "I'll get him."

But when he reached the porch, his horse was missing from the hitch-rail. Obviously Blaze Dawe had taken the saddled mount to make a quick getaway.

It had rained the previous night and the ground was still soft. The tracks of the horse were plain. Allen grinned as he studied them closely. He had put new shoes on that horse himself in the ranch blacksmith shop just a week ago. The bay's hoofs were an off-size, and Allen was sure he would recognize that horse's tracks anywhere.

He found the ranch cook, told old Marty what had happened to the Old Man, and then headed for a corral. The cook hurried to the ranchhouse to see what he could do for the boss. Allen found an extra saddle and rigging in the harness shed. He went to the corral and roped and saddled a rangy roan which he knew was fast. Then he rode away on the trail of the foreman.

ONE hour later Tom Allen was picking his way through the fir-clad, rugged mountains northeast of Turkey Track range. The bay's trail had been fairly easy to follow. Dawe had made little effort to hide his tracks. Apparently he was not expecting pursuit.

As Allen rode onward, he tried to put himself in Dawe's place, how he'd figure out the situation. The foreman had come up to the house, talked to the ranch owner, learned that he was fired. Then he'd knocked out Garry. Thinking the old man was dead, Dawe had stepped to the door, seen Allen, and had called him into the house. When Allen was inside the house Dawe had found his chance to knock the waddy out.

"Reckon he hoped I might be suspected of killin' and robbin' the boss," decided Allen. "If Garry had been dead and I'd left without tellin' anyone what happened, it shore would have looked bad for me. Dawe never was no mental giant."

He reached the south side of a gulch, dismounted and left his horse ground-hitched back in some brush, then continued on foot. He was sure that Blaze Dawe couldn't be far away. The tracks had grown fresher. Drops of water still clung to the edges.

Allen walked forward to the edge of the ravine. From the opposite side of the gulch a six-gun roared. A bullet tore through Allen's hat and the Stetson went flying off his head.

He cursed his carelessness, and dropped down behind a slanting shelf of rock, looking across the small canyon. He drew his gun and a quick shot below the whisp of smoke on the other side.

"Might have lost my brains?" Allen muttered, thinking about that bullet from Dawe's gun. "I take too much for granted. It shore would have served me right."

"I danged near got yuh," came the voice of the ex-foreman. "Too bad I didn't hit yuh harder, back there on the ranch. Then yuh'd be dead like the Boss."

Allen didn't answer that. There was no point in letting Dawe know that Garry wasn't dead. He glanced up at the limb of a tree hanging just above his head. He blinked and looked again at the round gray object fastened to the limb. It was one of the biggest hornets nest he had ever seen.

"Leaping pink toads!" muttered Allen as he gazed up. "I shore hope them hornets don't object to me bein' here."

Across the gulch Dawe fired again. The bullet chipped off a bit of rock not far from Allen's head. He returned the fire, but Dawe ducked down out of sight behind his rock barricade.

"We could keep this up all day and neither one of us get hurt much," said Allen disgustedly. "I got to try something drastic.

Again Dawe's gun roared. His bullet tore right through the hornets nest, snapping the limb of the tree from which it hung. Allen gasped in horror as he saw what happened and heard the buzzing of the angry insects.

As the limb dropped, the nest still fastened to it, Allen caught the end of

the branch with his left hand, still holding his gun in his right. Then he gave a quick twist and sent the limb flying across the canyon. It landed on the rocks right in front of Blaze Dawe. The nest was shattered and the hornets swarmed out and flew straight for the ex-foreman.

Dawe yelled with pain and started to run, his body covered with the stinging yellow jackets. Allen beat off the few hornets that were after him, then found a narrow place in the ravine, jumped across, and chased after Dawe.

The big man ran frantically until he reached a nearby creek. He leaped into the water and disappeared beneath the surface.

When Dawe finally succeeded in getting rid of the hornets and came to the surface, he found Tom Allen standing a little distance away covering him with his gun. Dawe had dropped his Colt back at the side of the canyon.

"Yore hornet trick didn't work the way you figgered," said Allen. "But it shore looks to me like you're the one who got stung." He scowled. "Have yuh got that money yuh stole from the ranch office?"

Dawe didn't answer.

His face was too swollen for him to do much talking.

Back on the other side of the canyon there came shouts and the pounding of hoofs. Allen saw that the rest of the Turkey Track outfit was arriving, led by Pecos Wilson.

"There's some gents lookin' for you, Dawe," said Allen. "Reckon they want to know what happened to their pay." He grinned. "And oh, yes, the Boss wants to see you."

"The Boss," mumbled Dawe. "He's dead."

"No he ain't," said Allen. "You didn't kill him—just knocked him out when yuh hit him." He nodded wisely. "I always figgered that, if you had a job to do, you'd be careless about yore work!"

Best Western Yarns of the Month!

THAT great Texas Ranger known as El Halcon, the Hawk, stars in one of his most exciting adventures in DEATH RIDES THE BORDER, a complete novel by Bradford Scott in the April issue of our companion magazine THRILLING WESTERN. In addition, the same issue features other smashing novelets and stories by top-flight Western writers.

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ONE of the finest Western novels of recent times—THE RIDER OF LOST CREEK, by Jim Mayo—appears in the April issue of WEST. It's a complete book-length thriller packed with exciting six-gun action, thrills and surprises!

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BOB PRYOR, the famous Rio Kid, and his fighting pards are at their best in GUNS OF HAPPY VALLEY, a complete pioneer action novel by Lee E. Wells featured in the April issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN.

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WAYNE MORGAN, the Robin Hood Outlaw of the Range, assumes the identity of the Masked Rider once more in order to protect the oppressed in THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH, complete novel by Chuck Martin in April MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

* * * * *

RANGER JIM HATFIELD moves in to deliver six-gun justice where it's needed when ranchers and fishermen suffer under the tyranny of a ruthless despoiler in GULF GUNS, Jackson Cole's outstanding Jim Hatfield novel in the April TEXAS RANGERS.

The Colt in Steele's hand thundered, sent the six-gun spinning out of the bearded man's reach

KILLERS RIDE ROANS

By TOM GUNN

A tricky outlaw may seem to be in two places at once, but when he knifes a Painted Post old-timer he can't evade the relentless pursuit of fighting law-dogs Steele and Watts!

CHAPTER I

The Masked Man

THE trouble started suddenly. One minute the Painted Post Saloon was wrapped in usual late afternoon quiet. The next minute a masked man rushed inside, whipped out a knife and hurled himself at the blind man dozing at a corner card table.

"Thimble Jack," the bartender, was sole witness to that murderous attack on helpless old George Griggs. He uttered a startled cry. But it came too late to warn Griggs. The blade flashed down and thudded to the hilt in the hollow of the victim's shoulder.

Then the attacker darted for the street

A SHERIFF BLUE STEELE NOVELET

and as he flung open the batwing doors he collided with Deputy Sheriff "Shorty" Watts.

The little redhead blocked the masked man's getaway, as much through surprised inaction as by deliberate intention. He glimpsed Griggs, face downward on the card table, knife handle protruding grotesquely from the deep reddening wound. Thimble Jack shouted again. Then the masked man rushed the little deputy.

Shorty by now was fully aroused to the emergency. He grabbed the man and clung. Then came the fight, the most violent struggle that the wild-eyed, fearful bartender had ever seen in all his years in the Arizona border country.

Shorty was much smaller and lighter than his antagonist. But he was as tough as rope and he had a redhead's ability to take punishment and fight back. He took more than he gave in this ugly encounter because the masked man's endeavor was to break away and reach the blue roan he had left standing at the hitchrail at the edge of the wooden platform sidewalk. So Shorty hung on, rocking to the impact of blows on his face and head, jabbing when he could.

They lurched towards the hitchrail, swayed for a precarious instant as the blue roan shied, then whirled back again to the saloon front. Thimble Jack, with a bottle grasped in one hand, gaped over the top of the batwing doors, pushed them apart and came part way out, then dodged back inside. The only sound was the hoarse, hurt grunts of the fighting men and the thumping of their boots on the sidewalk planking.

Shorty Watts

The masked man hooked a spur behind the little deputy's right leg and, with a wrestler's hold, threw all his weight and desperate strength into a twisty move that toppled Shorty, breaking his grip and sending him floundering.

AGAIN Griggs' attacker, hatless now but still masked with a red bandanna that covered his face to the eyes, turned for his horse.

At that moment, out of somewhere came Sheriff Blue Steele of Painted Post. The lean, bronzed lawman streaked silently toward the panting culprit. Twirling a Colt, so as to grasp it by the barrel, Steele struck with the ivory butt.

The masked man saw the blow coming and ducked. But he wasn't quite fast enough. The heavy Colt handle crashed. The glancing blow, above the man's left temple, laid open his scalp.

He went down in a limp heap.

Shorty reeled to his feet.

"He knifed ol' Griggsy, Sheriff!" he shrilled.

Steele clamped a hand onto the stunned man's shirt collar and dragged him into the saloon. His granite-gray eyes took in the situation in a flash.

"Get Doc!" he rapped out at Thimble Jack, who wavered beside the bar, still gripping the bottle.

Thimble Jack bee-lined for a stairway. He stumbled in his hasty ascent. A moment later he clattered down with the blinking, needle-nosed Doc Crabtree at his heels. Though abruptly aroused from his *siesta*, the Doc was alive to the demands on him. He carried his black satchel.

He set it on the card table and went to work immediately on Griggs. The old rancher was in serious condition. A dribble of bright red blood from a corner of his mouth told that the knife had punctured a lung. The Doc's hands, gentle but sure, raised him to a sitting position. Griggs' head lolled. He tried to speak but only a wheezy gurgling sound came.

"Easy, old boy," the Doc said. "Brace yourself, now."

The heavy-bladed knife made a sucking sound as it was withdrawn from the

wound. Griggs' filmed eyes stared sightlessly past the anxious faces around him.

Doc Crabtree handed the bloody knife to Steele and wagged his head, indicating hopelessness.

"Right here where he sits is the best place for him," he said. "But move the chair back, a couple of you, and lean it against the wall."

He turned back his cuffs and plunged briskly into the black satchel. Thimble Jack was giving a shaky, disjointed account of the attack.

"N-not a word was spoke!" he jabbered. "I never did see nothin' so cold-blooded! The hombre busts in, heads straight for pore ol' Griggsy and it was over before yuh could bat a eye!"

"Danged if I can savvy it!" blurted Shorty. "Griggsy is about the most inoffensive cuss in Indian County, with nary an enemy." He paused to press the back of a hand to a puffed lip. "That is, nobody's had a grudge agin the old-timer since—"

"Take a look, *segundo*, and the rest of yuh," Steele's crisp voice interrupted. "Ever see this party before?"

The knife wielder, still unconscious from the Sheriff's blow, was stretched out on the floor on his right side. Blood from the scalp rip had oozed over his face. He breathed spasmodically.

"Nope, not me," declared Shorty.

"Stranger far's I know," said Thimble Jack.

Doc Crabtree flicked a glance over the top of his shiny specs as he cut away the clothing from around Griggs' wound with a pair of surgical scissors.

"Looks like a concussion case," he opined. "Maybe a fracture. But let him lie. It's Griggsy here that counts. Bring Griggsy a drink, Jack."

Feeble, shaky old George Griggs tried to speak again. A gush of blood choked the words. He slumped again and would have fallen had not Shorty held him upright in the chair tilted against the wall.

From up at the end of the street, where it dwindled to a dusty road, came a familiar, growing sound. The sound of jangling tug chains, rattly wheel spokes and running horses. "Magpie" Stevens, on time to the minute, was arriving on his down-trip from Cottonwood with the old stage-coach that was Painted Post's link with the outer world.

With a grind of brakeshoes and a whoop the cumbersome vehicle slowed to a stop in front of the saloon. Magpie's feet hit the sidewalk. The batwing doors swung and the mail-bag skidded across the floor toward the bar.

Sheriff Blue Steele

THE dusty, tattered old stage driver froze there in the doorway, staring at the inert figure on the floor, then at the group hovering around Griggs.

"Daggone it all, it ain't possible!" he shrilled.

"What ain't?" Shorty shot back at him.

"Why, I met this bloody-faced gent, him and his blue roan out there, no more'n a half-hour ago! Little ways t'other side of the Caliente ford! He didn't pass me! How could he of got *here?*"

Magpie was a gabby old galoot and overfond of creating a sensation. Everybody knew that. Doc Crabtree sniffed.

"Absurd!" he grunted. "Impossible!"

"Fifteen minutes since the stranger knifed Griggsy," scoffed Shorty. "That means he rode from yonder side of the ford, which is five miles from here, in the other fifteen minutes. Either yuh dreamed yuh met him or else yuh're way off on yore time."

"Can't be," declared Magpie. "Time is my specialty. I got every mile between here and Cottonwood clocked down to the minute. Huh, I should have after travelin' the sixty miles twice a week for the past seven-eight years!"

Steele was the only one who showed serious interest in Magpie's strange statement.

"How far off was this roan rider yuh met up with?" he queried.

"Smack alongside the stage! Stopped and talked some. The feller asked me could I tell him the way to George Griggs' ranch!"

"Some other man, likely," said Shorty. "After all, lookin' down from where you set, his hat must of hid his face, didn't it?"

Thimble Jack had picked up the masked man's hat and laid it on the bar. He got it and handed it to Magpie.

"Reckernize the hat?"

It was a gray, dimple-crowned Stetson with a leather band studded with silver conchos—more conspicuous than most.

"Same blamed hat, I'd swear it!" vowed Magpie. "Also, there's one thing I never forget and that's a hoss."

Steele strode for the doorway, beckoning to the stage-coach driver.

"Come outside and take another look at that roan, Magpie," he requested.

Magpie followed, stationed himself on the edge of the sidewalk. He crammed a generous pinch of finecut into his hollow-cheeked, gap-toothed mouth and squinted an expert eye at the animal at the hitchrail.

"That hoss," he decided, "is the same as I saw up the road. Can't be no mistake. Same brand—that XL on the left hip."

Steele reached to a pocket of his calfskin vest for cigarette makings. Shorty trailed outside in time to hear Magpie's stubborn assertion.

"Think hard," he said. "Mightn't it be yuh seen the roan rider on yore uptrip yestiddy?"

Magpie flushed angrily and spat hard.

"Listen here, yuh red-eared, half-made pest!" he started in loud denial. "I know when—"

Steele swiftly decided to get the two of them apart. Nerves were tense at a time like this. Argument and confusion wouldn't help to solve the riddle. Shorty and Magpie always had been antagonistic to one another.

"Better take the roan up to the feed corral and unsaddle him, *segundo*," he interrupted.

Shorty hopped from the sidewalk, flung up the roan's reins and swung to saddle in stirrups too long for him. He reined the horse around and heeled it to a lope.

"That daggone little microbe, he'll cockleburr me once too often one of these days!" sputtered Magpie as he unloaded a crate of supplies from the stage-coach boot.

The Sheriff returned to the saloon. Twisting a cigarette shut, he stood over the victim of his Colt wallop, rock-hard eyes keenly exploring the bloody visage. The man stirred and groaned—sign of returning consciousness. Steele cupped a match to his smoke.

George Griggs' breathing came in rattly gasps.

"Sounds as though yuh're goin' to stretch hemp, mister man," Steele said in a low, taut voice to the man on the floor. "But not till I find out what's behind this loco affair."

IF THE knifer heard, he gave no indication. Steele toed him, making sure no gun was concealed on him. The only indication of his lethal intentions was the empty knife sheath on the left side of his belt. That was in itself uncommon. In this country a gun was a man's natural weapon.

As Steele silently reasoned, two facts loomed in this extraordinary affair. One was, the attacker had chosen a time and place as though he wanted his deadly act to be witnessed. It would have been much simpler, if he sought the life of Griggs, to have waited until the old rancher was alone at his spread southeast of town. The other fact was that he obviously chose to attract no widespread attention. That was why he had chosen to use a knife instead of a gun.

But why? And how could this mysterious culprit been at two far apart places at almost precisely the same time? The thought came to Steele that Magpie might have told his story as a means of establishing an alibi for the masked man. But he quickly dismissed the suspicion, or tried to.

Magpie had always been an upright character. Yet, as bitter experience had proved, there was always a first time for law-abiding and respectable citizens to stray from righteousness. The law held a man innocent until proved guilty.

But Steele had learned that in the process of crime solution, it was helpful to suspect every man until his innocence was thoroughly established.

CHAPTER II

Cheating Rope

MAGPIE'S story of meeting the roan rider, Steele finally decided, would bear further probing. He would wait until Magpie unloaded the stage-coach and unharnessed and corraled his six-horse team.

Doc Crabtree motioned to him. Steele crossed the room.

"If there's anything you crave to get out of Griggsy, you better start trying now," the Doc whispered.

Steele leaned close to the sinking man.

"Don't talk, Griggs," he said gently. "Don't try. Just nod or shake yore head as I ask some questions. Now listen, Griggs. Have yuh got any idea who knifed yuh?"

Griggs' head wagged a slow negative.

"Has anyone threatened yore life? Think back—back in the old days. The days of yore big trouble."

Griggs shook his head again, opening his lips as though to protest the question. But no sound came, only his labored breathing.

Steele's glinting eyes went to the man on the floor before he asked the next question.

"Now I want to ask about Ben Kester. Is he solid-built, reddish-brown hair, blue eyes, about thirty years old, around five-feet-eight, and with eyebrows that grow together above a thin humped nose?"

Griggs' eyes were on Steele in a vacant stare. They seemed to be glazing over, more blurred than they had been from the results of the affliction that robbed him of his vision. There came a pause in his agonized breathing. He gripped the arms of his chair, as though gathering his strength for an effort.

Then all at once his head tilted forward and he sagged and would have slid from the chair if Steele and Doc Crabtree hadn't taken quick hold of him.

"Coma," the Doc said. "The old boy's about played out. Internal bleeding. How much, it's hard to say. Jack! Chase upstairs and bring down a cot and blankets. What I wanted was to keep him in an upright position as long as possible."

The bartender charged for the stairs. When he had gone, leaving the two of them alone in the place with the dying man, the Doc probed Steele with a searching look through his thick lenses.

"Mind telling me who is Ben Kester, Sheriff?"

"Griggs' nephew."

"Nephew? Never knew Griggsy had any kin. How come, with that last question, you described the rascal there on the floor?"

Steele's answer was an indirect one, even evasive, though Doc Crabtree did not realize it at the time.

"I'll have to pump him now. How about taking a look at our visitor, Doc. Seems he's a long time coming to."

"In the interests of justice, I'll do it," the Doc said grimly. "But my personal inclination is to let the wretch suffer. This stabbing was the cruelest, most cowardly act I've ever known. Hanging is too good for him."

Thimble Jack came down from Doc's quarters over the saloon with canvas cot and blanket. The three of them made Griggs as comfortable as possible.

"Now then Jack, light up," Doc Crabtree said bruskly. "It's nearly dark. Black as a bat cave in here and I have to examine this hyena on the floor."

Climbing onto the bar Thimble Jack lighted the ornate kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling. As he stepped down, Shorty ambled back, toothpick dangling from a corner of his mouth. Nothing ever disturbed the little deputy's appetite.

"Judge Bertram's here," he reported. "Seen him as I come out of Chow Now's. Told him what happened. Here he is now."

Hoofs halted at the hitchrail, a heavy stride jarred the loose-planked sidewalk and a bulky, ruddy-faced man of sixty barged into the place. Judge John Bertram was important and looked the part. Besides being Indian County's leading citizen, he owned the biggest cattle outfit on the border, T Bar T. He had a shock of snowy hair and frosty, claw-hammer brows over intense blue eyes. His wide gaze fastened on the man on the floor in evident surprise.

"Good Godfrey, it can't be!" he finally exploded. "It's not possible!"

Steele was instantly alert.

"You know this man, Judge?"

"Know him? No, not exactly. But thunderation, Sheriff, I met and talked with him an hour ago, about sundown!"

"Where?"

"In the willows in the river bottom, this side of the ford. He'd made camp there."

"This same man? Yuh're shore, Judge?"

"Shore I'm shore! Yet it can't be, because Shorty tells me that this jasper has been here, knocked out cold, for a good hour! After he knifed George Griggs!"

SO MAGPIE had been right. Judge Bertram—there was nothing flighty or imaginative about him. The Sheriff, usually so sure of himself, felt a strange sense of helplessness. Never before had he been confronted with such a weird case.

He asked one more question.

"The camper at the ford, did yuh see his hoss, Judge?"

Bertram jerked an emphatic nod.

"A blue roan, branded XL. Tethered on that patch of salt grass by the road."

Everyone in Thimble Jack's place, except the semi-conscious Griggs, was stunned by Bertram's words. Everyone except the man on the floor. His eyes opened to glittering slits. What the Judge had said filled him with quivering excitement. For some moments he had been aware of what was going on around him. But he had remained motionless, awaiting his chance.

Now was the time. He scrambled erect with catlike agility and bolted for the door, hatless, bloody-faced and possessed of a frenzy that gave him abnormal energy.

Judge Bertram plunged for him. A frantic blow knocked the Judge aside. Steele's right hand forked for one of the twin Colts holstered at his buscadero belt, but in the tangle he dared not shoot for as the fugitive dashed outside, Bertram was on his heels.

Steele darted in pursuit but again Bertram's stocky figure loomed between him and the fleeing man who made a flying leap for the horse at the hitchrail—Bertram's horse, a moon-gray.

It was pitch-dark in the street. The fugitive was in saddle and on the run before Steele could slam out three shots after him. Even then, his aim was hindered, because the fleeing rider was in line with Chow Now's eating place across the street and there were customers in the place, where lamplight shone.

Bertram uttered a helpless roar.

"The sneakin' sidewinder was playin' possum, playin' for time! Yuh've got to get him, Sheriff, yuh hear? You've got to—!"

The demand was wasted. For the Sheriff was already headed for the corral, up past the jail. Shorty tootled after him. Precious minutes were lost as they caught up and saddled their horses and got going.

There was a thin haze of dust on the stage road. Steele scented it. A scent trail was his only giude on such a black night. His steel-dust gelding scented it too and its nimble legs quickly put behind the small clutter of ramshackle buildings that made up Painted Post. Shorty's slower pinto flattened its ears and raced several lengths behind.

Not until he had covered the five-mile stretch to the river did Steele pause. He reined down the sweaty, panting gelding as he neared the willow bottoms, and the blowing, jaded pinto came alongside.

Again Steele's sensitive nostrils explored the darkness. No dust here, in the sandy bottoms, only the rank, wet smell of bottomland growth. That and—smoke! The bitter-sweet scent of willow firewood. And then, as he warily topped a hump of ground that sloped to the rippling, shallow crossing, the Sheriff saw the dull wink of campfire embers.

"Easy, *segundo*," he said in a low voice. "If our man's holed up here, he's got a big advantage. Keep to the willows on that side of the road. I'll stay to this."

They advanced slowly, abreast, nerves tortured by suspense, eyes and ears probing ahead for any unfamiliar sound or movement. When they were within a few yards of the burned-down campfire, Steele saw a vague, blurred movement. A drawn Colt pronged toward it. Then suddenly his trigger finger went light.

Bertram's moon-gray was dragging rein, grazing on the patch of salt grass. Steele slid from saddle and crouched. He saw the animal plainer now. He heard the crunch as it nibbled and pulled at the coarse, tough forage, against the background murmur of the river shallows.

His voice sounded startlingly loud as he called out:

"Come out, killer! There's two of us after yuh and we know every foot of this ground! Yuh haven't a chance!"

No answer. Silence beat on his eardrums. And then a small sound came, not a part of the night loneliness but a human sound. It was a stricken moan and it came from beside the campfire embers.

Shorty heard it too. Circling swiftly toward the river bank, he closed in. Steele pressed forward, the gelding behind him at rein's end.

A BREATH of wind fanned the fire, brightening the dying embers into a momentary flare. Steele saw then. A man, twisting in dying agony, lay beside the campfire.

The Sheriff hurried to him. Shorty bustled boldly to the spot.

"Feed the fire, *segundo*," Steele ordered. "Let's have some light."

The little deputy saw a heap of fine, brittle fuel and tossed an armful of it onto the dull glow and fanned it into a quick blaze with his hat.

"Cree-ation!" he gusted as he stood over Steele who crouched beside the man on the ground. "It's him—we got him! And he's in his death throes!"

He had hardly uttered it before the spurred feet jerked out stiff and straight and an awful final sound came from the throat of their captive.

They were in a pool of dazzling brightness now as the firelight leaped. Before them, bloody-faced and hatless, just as they had seen Griggs' mysterious enemy on the floor of Thimble Jack's saloon, even to the empty knife sheath at his waist, was a man who never would account for his misdeeds on a gallows.

"He's cheated rope, Sheriff," Shorty said huskily.

Steele's fingers separated the blood-matted hair on the side of the dead man's head.

There was a massive bruise, a gory tab of torn scalp.

"How he got this far, then gave out is more'n I can figger, Sheriff."

"That's for Doc Crabtree to explain. Sometimes a desperate, badly-wounded man can stand a lot."

"Shore, that's right. There's been times when a man with a bullet-hole through his heart has lived to shoot it out. What now?"

"Catch up the Judge's hoss, *segundo*," Steele said, as he came erect and loosened the lariat looped to the gelding's saddle. "We're packin' a dead prisoner to town."

As they slowly jogged southward along the stage road, Shorty's mind indulged in curious speculations.

"This windup shore makes a fool out o' the Judge, don't it?"

"How so?"

"The camper with the roan couldn't of been here when the Judge passed on his way to town from the T Bar T. Yet there was such a party. Blamed if I can make sense out of it!"

"Mighty unlikely that the Judge and Magpie both could be mistaken."

"Migosh, then what's the explanation?"

Steele meditated as he built a cigarette in the dark.

"Of course, *segundo*, there are cases of identical twins."

He put such a doubtful twist in the statement that the little deputy barked a scornful laugh.

"Huh, suppose two hombres looked alike, dressed exackly alike and even rode twin hosses! Where does that leave us? Nowhere! Because this is the hombre that stabbed ol' Griggsy. We're plumb shore of that, on account of the moon-gray. And the mark of yore Colt butt on his skull!"

"Mebbe yuh're right, *segundo*. The main thing is to find out who attacked Griggs and why."

"Well, Sheriff, I didn't hanker to bring it up before the whole crowd. But me and you, we know Griggsy had a past. And we know it wasn't a pious one, neither."

Steele remembered plainly enough. So did everyone else in the Border country who had been there long enough. In his earlier days, George Griggs had become entangled with an outlaw crowd which had seen profitable uses for his ranch, for it lay close to the Mexican Border, offering haven for rustling and other villainy.

Griggs had been caught with stolen cattle. Steele and Shorty had caught him cinched the case. Judge Bertram had sent Griggs to the Territorial Prison at Yuma for a five-year stretch.

But Griggs had been released short of that time, on account of good behavior and a one-time record of peace-abiding honesty.

CHAPTER III

An Outcast

IT WAS a tribute to the character of George Griggs that he returned to the scene of his former crimes and made good to the last head and the last dollar for the losses he had caused his neighbors.

That act had won him respect. It restored him in the good esteem of the Borderland. An interval passed, in which George Griggs was given the hand of friendship by those who had brought him justice and true repentance. Then a disease he had acquired in his prison days laid hold of George Griggs, exacting the last toll of vengeance for his erring years. He slowly lost his sight. This very day he was in town, seeking what relief Doc Crabtree could give.

"So yuh figger that Griggs was knifed on account of some prison feud, *segundo?*"

"Or by some owlhooter pard of his rustlin' days."

"Still we don't know who this dead hombre is. Unless—"

Shorty waited for Steele to finish.

"Unless what?" he finally blurted impatiently.

"I reckon it can be told now. It has to be, because I'm goin' to ask Griggs about it when we get back to town. I tried, just as his strength failed, to find out if the description of this varmint tallies with that of one Ben Kester."

"And who's Ben Kester?" demanded Shorty, unknowingly parroting Doc Crabtree's question.

Steele paused to light his cigarette, the glow lighting up his somber, rugged face as he touched flame to the brown paper twisty.

"George Griggs' nephew, his only kin."

"But why in creation'd Griggsy's nephew set out to murder the old man?"

"With Griggs dead, Kester inherits one of the most valuable ranches in Arizona."

"But why would Kester or anybody else do the knife job in the presence of a eye witness?"

Steele shrugged one shoulder.

"That remains to be explained, *segundo.* Also, if this body we're lugging in isn't Kester's, we're up to our hocks in the deepest mystery I ever have come onto. Anyhow, I'll tell yuh what I know about Ben Kester and how I know.

About two months before, the Sheriff said, Griggs had come to the jail office, a pitiful, shaken wreck of the man he had been, groped for a chair and settled into it with a mournful sigh.

"Sheriff, my sight's going fast," he told Steele, "and I'm not fitten to run the ranch any more. Can't even write a letter that's in my mind, so I came hopin' yuh'd do me the favor. And say nothin' for a spell. That's why I came to you, Blue Steele. If ever there was a short-tongued man, yuh're him. I want yuh should write a letter to my nephew, Ben Kester, Jackson Hole, Wyomin'."

The letter asked Kester to come take charge of the Griggs spread. Griggs had not seen this son of his dead sister for years, but knew he was a tumbleweed puncher, improvident but widely experienced in range matters, which probably qualified him for the job. Griggs had no one else to lean upon.

"Griggsy ever get a answer to that letter yuh wrote for him?" Shorty asked, when Steele had finished.

"Reckon not. If an answer had come, Griggs would have had me read it to him."

"Shore. On account of he craved to keep it a secret for a spell. Well, Sheriff, Kester better show up. If this ain't him. It's a cinch now that Griggsy won't ever ride herd again."

That was a prize understatement. For when they made a triumphant reappearance at Thimble Jack's, they were met with solemn faces. Doc Crabtree pointed mutely to the cot. The blanket had been pulled up over Griggs' face.

So now no way remained to find out if the dead killer resembled Ben Kester. Nor was there any mark or clue of identity on the killer. The pockets were empty except for such small items that any man would carry. The only indication at all of the point of his origin was a label on the inner band of the hat he had left in his escape from the saloon. It was the label of a Provo, Utah, saddlery and outfitter. There could be a

hundred hats like it.

Doc Crabtree held brief autopsy over the remains of the nameless killer. He examined the torn scalp, probed with his delicate surgeon's fingers and his brow puckered as he straightened and faced his onlookers.

"Sort of a powerful wallop you gave this miscreant with your gun butt, Sheriff. The skull is badly fractured. Definitely a killing blow, that was."

STEELE also was puzzled.

"Unusual, isn't it, for a man to revive from such a serious injury? Enough to make a fightin' escape and a five-mile ride?"

"More than unusual. Downright miraculous."

"I'd a swore I didn't hit him that hard."

"Well, you can't always account for these things. Some men have more stamina than others, can rise to superhuman effort and then collapse all at once."

"Just what I claimed," chirped Shorty.

"Best explanation I can give," the Doc concluded, "is that a blood clot formed. Exertion dislodged it, causing thrombosis, paralysis and—death."

That explanation, had the truth been known at the time, would have embarrassed Doc Crabtree. It would have robbed him of the authority and prestige that was his in Painted Post and the wide region around, where he was the only medic.

For at that very hour the roan-riding killer dark-camped in a thicket not far from the road approach to the Caliente ford.

He had not escaped unscathed. For his head throbbed agonizingly as he stooped at the river's edge and washed the dried blood from his face and scalp.

But despite the racking pain, he wore a gloating grin as he stretched out on a saddle and closed his eyes to the blinking stars.

"Might of been worse," he reflected. "The main thing is, Griggs is done for. Ben Kester won't ever come. And all I got to do is lay low till my scalp heals, then get new clothes, another hoss and show up at the Griggs spread with a set of whiskers—and the letter."

His ugly, leering grin became a chuckle.

"I shore put it over neat on that Sheriff. Whatever happens from now on, the killin' of Griggs is laid to Nick Newhall. And he won't ever talk. And the law is that two men can't be charged with the same crime. Yeah, everything considered it might of been worse. Though if it hadn't been for that blasted little redhead, things'd of gone smoother."

At dawn next morning the rider of the roan, wearing a hat now, a replica of that hat he had abandoned at Thimble Jack's, proceeded warily down along the river, keeping to cover as much as possible.

"Somewhere below lies Los Pasos," he told himself. "And I'll make connections with somebody there that'll do things for me on a promise. Against the time when I'm boss and owner of George Griggs' spread."

Miles back, at Painted Post, a saddened group lowered the mortal remains of one Nick Newhall and his victim into freshly-dug graves in the bare little Boothill cemetery on the edge of the town. Over the grave of Griggs' killer they planted an unmarked headboard.

"And now," rumbled Judge Bertram, "seems like it's up to T Bar T to run Griggs' brand. He has four-five hundred head on the Border range, and them cattle need tendin'."

"We'd better dangle down to the Griggs' place pronto," Steele said. "And when Magpie makes his next up-trip to Cottonwood, I'll send word to the authorities at Jackson Hole to try and locate Ben Kester."

"If that nephew yuh tell us about don't show up, Sheriff," pondered Shorty, "then what'll become of Griggsy's propitty?"

"Nothin', not for a long time. Then if no heir is found, the ranch will be sold at public auction, the proceeds goin' to the county. That correct, Judge?"

"That's what troubles me," growled Bertram. "If that ground falls into wrong hands, there'll be the devil to pay. As we all know, from past history."

"Wouldn't you bid for it, Judge?" asked Shorty.

"Yuh bet I would!" boomed Bertram. "The Griggs range would be a real valuable addition to the T Bar T. But an owlhoot combination of Los Pasos crooks, who tried to get their hands on that place before, they could outbid me. And will, if that time comes."

Los Pasos, some twenty miles east of

Painted Post, had been a trouble spot for years. The town was an outlaw nest, a hangout for notorious Border characters. Many of Steele's and Shorty's most dangerous adventures in their ceaseless struggle to preserve law and order in the Border country emanated from Los Pasos.

GRIGGS' ranch, just inside the boundary of Indian County, Steele's bailiwick, was about half-way between Painted Post and Los Pasos. The grazing area extended southward to the Mexican Border. The home spread was situated on a benchland in the Caliente Hills, overlooking a wide desert basin. There was a spring-fed *ceinega* on the bench, a neglected array of ranch buildings, corrals and fenced meadow and a rock-walled ranchhouse with a flat Mexican-style roof with projecting pole timbers.

The two lawmen and Bertram were surprised as they neared the spread to see smoke rising from a kitchen stovepipe.

"Shucks, ol' Griggsy must of hired somebody to look after things!" piped Shorty.

"He didn't mention it when he hit town yesterday," Steele declared.

"Who in thunderation could of come in and took over, then?" Bertram demanded in a rankled voice. "Looks like we might have a argument on our hands already!"

"Migosh, it'd be bad news if he made a dicker with some Paseño before he got kilt, wouldn't it?" jabbered Shorty.

"Whoever it is ain't any friend of ours, or we'd of heard about it," Bertram grumbled. "For that matter, there ain't no neighbors closer than Rancho Robles. And they're bad medicine, that tribe."

"We'll soon find out," Steele said crisply, as he touched spur to the gelding and forged ahead.

As they arrived at the ranch premises, they saw a small band of horses in the cavvy corral.

"All Griggsy's but that stocking-footed sorrel," Shorty observed. "It's got a strange brand, one I never seen before."

"And there's the owner, I reckon, that's just come to the doorway," Steele pointed out.

They made for the house at a lope. The man was sitting on the steps, a pan gripped between his knees and paring potatoes as the Sheriff swung from leather.

"Howdy," drawled the man in the doorway in answer to the Sheriff's curt greeting.

He set the pan on the floor inside, rose lazily and wiped his hands against his levi-clad legs. He was a gangly, loose-built sort in his late twenties with a lean, dark-tanned face, and round, blue eyes that inspected the three visitors calmly and deliberately.

"Makin' myself at home as yuh see," he said. His eyes came to rest on Bertram as the most probable one of them that concerned his next words: "You George Griggs?"

"I am not!" snorted the Judge.

The round blue eyes looked vaguely disappointed.

"Well now, neighbors mebbe. In which case yuh might know when I can expect him back."

"He's not comin' back, stranger," Steele said, rock-hard eyes riveted on the lanky man's face.

The round eyes widened, then crinkled. He saw the badge on Steele's vest.

"That a joke, Sheriff? Don't tell me he's in trouble—again!"

"George Griggs' troubles are over," Steele said. "For good. We've just come from buryin' him."

The man at the doorway staggered back and lifted a hand to steady himself against the door frame. His wide mouth gaped partly open, then puckered and he gave a soft whistle.

"Well now, that's sort of a jolt. Mind tellin' a man about it? Poor old George—dead! Right recent, was it? And how come?"

"Who are you?" Bertram bluntly demanded.

"Me?" the other exclaimed mildly. "Why, I'm Ben Kester. George Griggs' nephew."

That quiet utterance, coming on the heels of lingering perplexities surrounding Griggs' death, nearly bowled Judge Bertram off of the moon-gray.

"Migosh!" Shorty croaked. "When'd you land?"

"Two-three hours ago."

Steele hid his inward astonishment and confusion. His face was a bronzed, expressionless mask, his mouth a thin, lipless line.

"Griggs was stabbed to death yester-

day by an unidentified man. We buried him too, yonder at Painted Post. Yuh got the letter?"

The stranger blinked.

"What letter?"

"Griggs wrote to yuh. To Jackson Hole."

The man's expression chilled, and so did his voice.

"Left Jackson Hole months ago."

"Then how come yuh got here?" demanded Shorty.

"Why, I just up and come. The notion's been on me lately."

"Come from where?" Steele asked.

"Oh, up north. Here and there."

He sensed that the answer was unsatisfactory.

"Chucklined down through Utah, one outfit and another."

"I reckon yuh've got some proof to show yuh're Ben Kester?" Steele said.

"Well now, is that necessary around here?" the fellow asked, with a slight show of resentment.

"In yore case, yes. Yuh're Griggs' only kin, ain't yuh? His heir, in other words."

"That's right! Well now, I never did think of that! I inherit this spread, don't I?"

"After provin' yore identity and so forth, I reckon yuh do."

CHAPTER IV

Finger of Suspicion

UNCERTAINTY returned to the lanky man's face. His eyes looked past his callers with an empty, haunted wideness. He drew his hand from the door frame, rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, and sat down.

"Well now Sheriff," he faltered, "that might be sort of—of complicated." He stirred uneasily.

"Why?"

"Truth is," came the reluctant answer, "I ain't used the name of Kester lately."

"Why not?"

The man's feet fidgeted as he clasped his hands between his knees and lowered his gaze to the ground.

"Up Jackson Hole way last spring there was a little mixup of brands at roundup. Me, I had no part in it. But some folks, including my boss on Triangle D, they thought I did. I—I didn't stay and settle it. I drifted."

"Then yuh have nothin' to show who yuh are?"

"Nary a thing. Of course, I could prove through Triangle D that I'm Ben Kester, all right. But under the circumstances, I'd just as soon not."

"Meanin' yuh'd rather give up yore claim to this ranch?"

"No, Sheriff, I don't mean that. I done no wrong up there in Wyoming. It—it's just that it'd be hard by this time to prove that I didn't."

"Yuh made a mistake vamoosing under a cloud."

"I shore enough did, Sheriff."

Steele twisted around in saddle and saw Bertram scowling suspiciously.

"What do you think about it, Judge?"

The T Bar T owner was far from pleased at the unexpected turn of affairs.

"I think," Bertram stated coldly, "that this pilgrim, whoever he is, chose a mighty peculiar time to show up, by Godfrey!"

"Well, there's one thing yuh can depend on, gents," the man in the doorway declared earnestly, "that is, I'm not runnin' away no more. From here or anywheres else. And there's work that needs doin' on this place, whoever does it. I saw that the minute I dangled in."

"Then suppose yuh stay and start doin' it," Steele decided.

"How about leavin' Shorty to keep check," Bertram suggested. "For one thing, I'd like to see a tally of Griggs' herd. Before it up and disappears."

"That's sort of pointed, Yore Honor," the lank stranger said injuredly. "After all, everything that's here is mine, or will be."

"We'll see," grunted Bertram.

"As for the *segundo*," Steele said, "I have need of him. Yuh can send over a T Bar T rider, Judge, until matters are cleared up."

"I can use help," said the self-styled Kester. "Send him."

Steele, Shorty and Bertram made their departure, the Judge fuming as they headed westward.

"Sooner I get one of my own punchers over the better," he said. "So I'm makin' straight for the T Bar T."

"We're goin' along with yuh," Steele said. "Far as the ford."

Bertram shot a quizzical look at the Sheriff.

"What's on yore mind?"

"Several things, Judge. One is, I want to make a look-see in daylight at that camp spot where we found the dead hombre."

They didn't say much more until they reached the Caliente bottoms. There Steele swung from leather and began a painstaking inspection of the camp and vicinity. Whatever he expected to find, it was evident that he found it when he halted at the patch of salt grass and examined the ground closely. He returned briskly to his waiting companions with a strange new glint in his granite eyes.

"It's like I figgered," he told them tensely. "*Two* hosses grazed there right recent. Yore moon-gray, Judge, and another. The other hoss was picketed."

"Thunderation, I told yuh that my own self!" stormed the Judge. "Do yuh got to go around checkin' up on my say-so?"

"I'm checkin' up on Griggs' killer," Steele reminded him.

"Ain't no doubt about him bein' dead, is there?" Bertram grunted irritably.

"Reckon not, Judge. But there's some doubt about his killer bein' dead."

FOR the second time that morning, Judge Bertram was almost jolted from saddle by surprise.

"Thunderation t h e n w h o i s that scoundrel we buried?"

"Migosh, I don't savvy either!" shrilled Shorty.

A mirthless smile touched Steele's thin lips.

"I don't savvy it all myself, not yet." Then he went grimly serious. "The point is, the dead man that we found here last night ain't the one that made camp earlier."

"Yuh insinuatin' I'm blind, like Griggs was?" snapped Bertram.

"No, Judge. But yuh admitted yoreself that yuh didn't get a thorough look at the face of the man yuh saw here on yore way to town. And none of us, including yoreself, got a good look at the face of the man I gunwalloped. Because it was blood-smeared when he laid there on the saloon floor."

"But the man I saw camped was dressed the same as the other. If there was another. Same hoss, too. And Magpie backs me up. Yuh can't get around that, by Godfrey!"

"Don't aim to get around it, Judge. Just tryin' to explain it."

Bertram pondered deeply for several moments, then wacked his thick thigh with sudden fierce enthusiasm.

"I got it!" he whooped. "The second man must of been that cuss that claims he's Griggs' nephew! He had a pard kill Griggs, then went and lit at Griggs' place! All set to claim the property in the name of Ben Kester! Thunderation, that explains why that cuss we met this mornin' didn't have any letter and gave that windy excuse for not bein' able to identify himself!"

"Yuh make a good case of it, Judge," Steele said drily, "but we haven't a scrap of proof. All we know so far is that two men — two hosses anyhow — inhabited this camp spot. One of the hosses was yores, the other a blue roan branded XL. Yet we have a blue roan branded XL in the town corral."

Bertram made an impatient motion as though fanning at a fly in front of his square, ruddy face.

"Thunderation, I give up! I'm no good at riddles! I'm goin' to get a T Bar T cowhand to take hold at Griggs' place! And if I was you, Steele, I'd bring that alleged Kester in to the lockup. And keep him there till yuh find out who he is—or ain't!"

What Steele did, after Bertram splashed across the river and headed up-bank on the other side along the T Bar T trail was to make a further study of horse tracks in the vicinity.

He found fresh hoofmarks crossing the stage road and pointed downriver. On the loose, sandy bottomland he could find no clear imprint. But a quarter-mile below road and camp spot he came upon a mud-slick, drying after a recent rain freshet that had raised the stream overnight.

Here was the distinct imprint of a full-shod horse. In the desert country, saddle animals were usually only half-shod—forefeet bare. Only for long and steady riding was a mount full-shod.

Here was a definite clue of a long rider.

"*Segundo,* did yuh notice the shoes on that blue roan yuh corralled last night?" Steele asked.

The little deputy had an infallible eye

for horse characteristics.

"Yuh bet I did, Sheriff," he said. "That roan wore iron all around. Took particular notice, because its hoofs needed trimmin'. Long time since that hoss was manicured in any blacksmith shop. Coldshod, it was. Like yuh'll shoe a hoss on the trail. Thin, worn shoes."

"Such as these?"

Shorty eyed the mud tracks.

"Hullo, there's a new shoe on the left hind hoof of the critter that come along here, Sheriff! That don't tally, as I recollect."

There was no use in attempting to track farther. From this point the tracks swerved to high, bare ground that bore no sign, not enough for the keenest-eyed tracker to follow.

"Let's make for town and have a look at that roan," Steele decided. "Then we'll know for a certainty whether or not the roan that the Judge and Magpie saw was another hoss."

"Now we're gettin' somewheres!" exclaimed Shorty. "I hope."

It was past noon when they reached Painted Post. Shorty reined up at the corral gate and dismounted to lower the bars. He stood there, scanning the round enclosure, a dazed expression on his freckled, homely face.

"Migosh, Sheriff!" he yelped. "The roan—it's gone!"

Magpie's collar-marked stage animals, several extra head, were at the feed rack or in the patch of shade under a ramada shelter. But the horse which had brought the masked killer to Painted Post was nowhere to be seen. . . .

MILES to the east a tired rider paused on a long ridge that overlooked the lower Caliente. His eye followed the long shiny ribbon to a wide bend where stood a small, scattered town. Dominating the squat, ugly buildings, mostly Mexican-style adobes, rose a tall-fronted building hugely-lettered:

TECOLOTE CLUB

"That's the place," mused the rider. "And Pete Gridley's my man."

He swung his blue roan to a deep, brushy gully, dismounted, removed his saddle-bags and drew out of them a six-gun. He did a heartless and revolting thing then. He aimed it at the patient, faithful animal that had carried him so far.

"Trail's end for you, cayuse."

The gun roared. The roan dropped, a bullet-hole between its eyes. Shouldering the saddle-bags, the man crossed the ridge and trudged downslope for the town.

He was exhausted but pleased with himself as he slogged into the Tecolote, almost deserted at this hour, and dumped his burdensome saddle-bags onto the bar. He ordered a drink and tossed it down, taking care to keep the hat tilted so as to conceal the throbbing wound on the side of his head.

"Now where's the boss?" he demanded.

"Who wants to know?" the man behind the bar answered sullenly.

"Too bad, but I plumb forgot my call-in' cards."

The bartender jerked a vague thumb.

"Pete Gridley generally inhabits the back room."

With the whisky giving him new boldness, the new arrival took his saddle-bags and swaggered to a curtained doorway. At a desk he saw a fat, bald man with a fuzzed, unlighted cigar in his coarse mouth. Jauntily the caller twirled a chair and flung himself onto it astride so that his crossed arms rested on the back and he faced the Los Pasos boss across them.

Pete Gridley wasted no politeness on preliminaries. Without turning he grunted:

"Who are you, and what yuh want, huh?"

"Don't let's get started on the wrong foot, Gridley," his visitor crackled with equal abruptness. "I'm cuttin' yuh in on a nice deal."

"Yeah? Spill it."

"How'd yuh like the run of George Griggs' ranch? With an owner that'll cooperate. But before we start, send out for grub. I've missed a flock of meals lately."

Gridley looked at the man with flat, cold eyes.

"Griggsy sellin' out?"

"Griggs is dead."

Gridley took the cigar from his mouth and stared at it.

"Since when?"

The man on the chair smirked across his folded arms.

"Interested, huh? A big rare steak, coffee, all the trimmin's. Then we talk." He gingerly peeled off his hat and tossed it onto the desk. "And if yuh've got a

sawbones in this prairie dog village that'll keep his bazoo buttoned, send for him. I need some patchin' up, Pete."

A sharp-eyed man slithered past the curtained doorway and poised there expectantly.

"Yeah, Boss?" he droned, one hand hooked toward a bulge inside his coat.

How Gridley had given the signal left his caller guessing.

"This is my right bower," Gridley said. "His name's Doc Simmons."

"Yuh can start callin' me Ben—Ben Kester," said the man in the chair. "How about another drink while yuh get busy, Doc?"

Before the hour had passed, the scalp rip was bandaged and the man who claimed to be Ben Kester was in eager confab with Pete Gridley while he devoured a hearty meal from a tray on Gridley's desk. . . .

Over at Painted Post, slick-haired, sad-eyed Thimble Jack explained to Steele and Shorty the absence of the blue roan from the town corral.

"All I know is that Doc Crabtree was took with a sudden notion to go somewheres two-three hours ago. Nope, I don't know whichaway he headed. But he needed a hoss. So he up and borrered the killer's."

The explanation left Steele impatient. Shorty was impatient too. To get across to Chow Now's for noon eats.

They were finishing a meal when the Doc, riding with the stiffness of one who seldom sat saddle, appeared in front of the corral and awkwardly alighted from the blue roan.

THE lawmen lost no time in getting to him. The Doc endured a volley of questions stoically.

"Suppose I tell you that where I've been and what I've been doing is a professional secret?" he parried.

"Suppose we tell you that the law in this case stands bigger'n yore confidential chest-thumpin' or whatever it was?" Shorty shot back at him.

The Doc debated with himself before replying.

"All right, let's suppose it does. But it so happens I've been on official business, too. In my capacity as ex-officio coroner of Indian County."

He took from inside his coat a knife and scabbard.

"The weapon that lobo left sticking in poor old Griggs," he said. "I got to thinking it might furnish a clue to the identity of the killer. Now who knows knives? A Mexican, of course. So I took this down to Circle Seven and showed it to that buckaroo friend of ours, Joe Zaca."

"Good leather, Doc," commented Steele. "What'd Joe say?"

"That this knife wasn't of a size and shape seen in these parts. He's a knife expert, Joe is. Has helped me catalogue my collection, y'know. He thinks—"

Shorty's excited yelp interrupted. The little deputy was examining the roan's hoofs. He had the left hind foot lifted.

"Hey, here's a new shoe! A cold shoe!"

"What of it?" sniffed Doc Crabtree. "The critter cast one on the way over to Circle Seven. Joe Zaca put this one on."

"Shore of that?"

"What of it?" the Doc snapped half-angrily.

"Didn't by any chance roam up along the river?"

"Are you loco? I said I rode south, to the Circle Seven. Of course, if you want to make a mystery you can ask Joe Zaca himself. When he gets back!"

"Back from where?"

"I caught him just as he was starting down Sonora way. To visit his brother."

"What about this knife?" Steele interrupted.

"Joe said it had been used to cut rope."

"Shucks, that ain't important!" scoffed Shorty. "What I crave to find out is—"

"Might be plenty important," Steele declared.

He took knife and sheath from the Doc's hand. He drew the knife and tapped the empty sheath against a boot heel. Into his cupped hand spilled some tiny shreds. He studied them intently.

"Cotton rope. Or canvas. Both, mebbe. Don't mean anything of itself. But it might fit in with some other stray facts later on. I've got a notion it will. Much obliged, Doc."

"But how about this new shoe?" cried Shorty. "It's a heap more important, Sheriff!"

Steele settled that in few words.

"If the Doc had moseyed up along the Caliente, we'd of met up with him, segundo," he said. "Don't let's let a freak coincidence draw us off the trail."

"Coincidence, my eye!" Shorty sputtered indignantly.

CHAPTER V

A Letter Turns Up

THE lanky, easygoing waddy who said he was Griggs' nephew stayed on at the dead man's ranch, working industriously, bringing the run-down spread to a state of order. But his every move was closely watched by Judge Bertram's rep—and by others.

When news of his presence reached Los Pasos, Pete Gridley hurriedly summoned the man known as "Ben Kester," who concealed his chagrin with loud boasting.

"Don't matter who the yahoo claims he is," he argued. "I've got proof that'll put the kibosh on his game!"

"Yuh might have to back up yore proof with somethin' more than blab."

"I'll back it up with lead!" blustered the man they called "Ben."

"That'll bring Blue Steele on your neck," said Gridley.

"Huh, that dumb cowtown Sheriff won't make trouble! Anyhow, I'll claim I had to shoot to defend my rights! Few days more, when my scalp heals and my whiskers grow to go with these new duds I'll show up at the Griggs' place and settle it!"

Following Doc Crabtree's effort to identifiy the death knife, Steele posted mail queries to Wyoming and elsewhere. Responses came. But he didn't divulge their nature to his little deputy. Yet Shorty observed that the Sheriff was wrapped up in deep thinking that foretold early action.

There came a morning when Steele said:

"Let's ride for the Griggs place, *segundo.* Somethin' is about due to happen."

"That's what I figger, Sheriff. Judge Bertram has his neck bowed to make that feller that claims he's Griggsy's nephew prove hisself or get."

"The Judge is worried," Steele replied pensively, as they rode out of town. "Can't blame him. The yarn that waddy told was sort of unconvincin'."

"The Judge suspects that nephew hombre was mixed up in the killin' of Griggsy."

"He's not the only one."

"We got to settle it somehow, Sheriff."

"It'll be settled *muy pronto.*"

"That mean soon?"

"It means today. If my hunch is right."

Shorty perked up. He disliked suspense, uncertainty.

"But we're still as far as ever from knowin' who killed Griggsy," he said.

"Suppose yuh let events take their course, *segundo.* Just keep yore eyes open."

"And my mouth shut. That what yuh mean?"

Steele didn't answer, but that was exactly what he meant. Shorty had seen the Sheriff in this mood before. He had learned that it wasn't wise to upset the delicate balance of Steele's silent planning. He was biding his time, making sure of his ground before he leaped. At this juncture it was useless to question him.

So the talky little redhead rode in silence. But he sensed a swiftly approaching climax. Nearing the bench spread, they saw another rider topping the Caliente Hills, approaching the ranch premises from the south.

With a quick word of warning, the Sheriff reined the steel-dust gelding to cover behind screening mesquite in a shallow wash.

"Shucks, he's probably only Judge Bertram's puncher," scoffed Shorty.

Steele's keener vision had made out that the rider was not.

"Everything depends on us getting there at exactly the right time, *segundo,*" warned Steele. "My hunch was right. Today's the pay-off."

Their arrival was timely. But it was no accident that they interrupted a scene that if finished might have ended forever this opportunity to solve the strange killing of George Griggs and the mystifying events that followed the crime.

At Steele's guidance, they approached the ranch premises with stealthy caution, a barn looming between them and the rider just up from the south. They rounded the barn, hoof sounds cushioned in long-accumulated debris that gave no warning of their presence. They heard voices—one loud and domineering, the other mild but insistent.

"Now!" said Steele, after a pause.

SPURTING around the barn, he came abruptly on two men at the corral gate. One was the lanky waddy, the other a full-bearded stoutly built man who bullied Griggs' self-asserted kinsman with a brandished six-gun.

"So yuh won't clear out, huh?" the bearded man was saying. "I didn't expect yuh would. Yuh're joinin' old Griggs, cowboy! Dead men don't talk!"

He slammed his six-gun down to a deadly aim just as a razor-edged voice slashed out from behind him:

"Drop that gun!"

The bearded man craned around, six-gun sagging in his hand. The lanky waddy leaped, a fist cracked and the bearded man smashed against the corral gate, his weapon dropping in the dust.

Seeing the Painted Post lawmen, the bearded man recovered his wits hastily.

"Just in time!" he yelled, as though welcoming their presence. "This crook stole my land! It was him or me!"

"Didn't look thataway to me!" cried Shorty. "Looked more like yuh was fixin' to shoot a unarmed man!"

The lanky waddy grinned wanly.

"Well now, that was a close call! It's a frame-up, Sheriff. I heard Judge Bertram was out to get me. But I didn't think he'd hire a gunslinger to shut me up!"

"That's a lie!" raged the bearded man. "I never heard of any Bertram! I'm here on my own! Yeah, and in more ways than one! I'm on my own ground!"

"You claim to own this ranch?" Steele's voice was almost pleasantly sociable.

"I'm Ben Kester!"

"Migosh!" gasped Shorty. "Another one?"

"The real one!" vowed the bearded man, rubbing his jaw and glaring at the man who had hit him.

"There's been some doubt," Steele said.

"I got proof!" ranted the man as he took a worn, crinkled envelope from an inner pocket and started toward Steele with it.

A colt pronged out, halting him. Steele kneed the gelding forward and took the letter. He whipped open the envelope and read the letter inside:

Dear Ben: Years since we've seen each other, years that have dealt hard with me. You're my only kin, nobody else left to appeal to. I need your help, boy, not in a money way, but to run my ranch down here in the Painted Post country. You see, Ben, I'm going blind. Can't even see to write this with my own hand. Please come soon as I'm depending on friends to handle my cattle till you do. I need you. Your time won't be wasted, for I'll pay you more than wages and when the time comes all I own will be yours.

Your uncle,
GEORGE GRIGGS

It was the letter that Steele had written for Griggs, the letter that never had brought an answer, the letter that the lank claimant declared had never reached him.

Steele returned the letter to the envelope, then examined the outside of it. His rock-gray eyes were slitted with a lazy expression. But they were sharp enough to see the bearded man make a move to pick up the six-gun. The Colt jabbed again, halting the move.

"Something odd about this letter," drawled the Sheriff.

"It's genuine, and yuh can't say it ain't!" vowed the bearded man.

"Shore. I know that. Wrote it myself. But there's no cancellation mark on the back of the envelope."

"Meanin' what?" the man at the gate demanded brashly.

"Meanin' it was never received at the Jackson Hole post-office."

"Hogwash!"

The bearded man started for Steele again, hand reaching out. He made a deceptively quick diving grab for the six-gun in the dust. The Colt in Steele's hand thundered. A well-aimed slug sent the six-gun spinning out of the fellow's reach and he leaped away, jerking the reaching hand.

"Better pick up that stinger, *segundo*," Steele was saying calmly. "And watch our whiskered friend close."

"But migosh, Sheriff, ain't he the real Kester?"

"He's George Griggs' killer."

"Yuh can't prove that!" came the frantic denial.

"This letter is proof enough to hang yuh, along with a few other facts I've got. It all began when you and yore outlaw pardner held up and robbed a mail train near Ogden. Yuh looted the mail, Herb Hardin, and this letter gave yuh the idea of playin' the part of Ben Kester. A blind man would never see the deception, yuh figgered. The North was gettin' too hot for you and yore pard. So the two of yuh came here."

SHORTY was on the ground now, scooping up the six-guns.

"Hold on, Sheriff," he yelped. "If he was set to fool Griggsy into thinkin' he was his nephew, what for did he kill him?"

"To play double safe, get quick ownership of this ranch, and also fasten the crime onto his pardner, a wanted man named Newhall."

"How?"

"I wondered myself for days. As I figger it now, Hardin and Newhall separated as they neared Painted Post. Hardin come on into town on the pretext of gettin' supplies."

"Then—then Newhall was that river camper? The jigger Magpie and Judge Bertram saw?"

"Correct, *segundo.* And the reason they were careful not to be seen together is that they dressed alike, rode twin roans. It was a scheme they worked up North, a twin act. Looked enough alike to be mistook. Handy in case an alibi was needed. It confused witnesses. It was even handier in the scheme that Hardin worked out."

"What scheme?"

"Such a brazen scheme that it mighty near succeeded. He'd learned from Newhall through Magpie, who forgot to tell us, that Griggs was in town, hangin' around Thimble Jack's so that Doc Crabtree could tend him. So Hardin went in and knifed Griggs. Leadin' a chase north, he knew Newhall would be caught, blamed and hanged. Then he, Hardin, would be safe forever from punishment and by changin' his appearance, such as with them whiskers, could reappear later with the Griggs' letter and claim the ranch."

"Huh, I upset that scheme some when I grabbed him!"

"Yuh shore did, *segundo.* But he carried it out anyhow when he escaped. He killed unsuspectin' Newhall with a gun wallop, switched hosses and managed to swap identity with his double, who pretty much resembled him."

Behind the screening whiskers, Hardin's face was ghastly.

"Yuh'll have a tough time makin' any jury believe such a unlikely story, blast yuh!" he muttered.

"Might be, except for one thing, Hardin," Steele went on. "Strange how justice works out sometimes. If yuh ever hold up a train in the hereafter and slash open mail bags, be more careful when yuh sheath yore knife."

"Yuh can't bluff me into admittin' nothin'!" blazed Hardin.

"I don't have to. The knife that killed George Griggs is telltale evidence that links you to this whole fantastic conspiracy, Hardin. Mail-bag lint inside that knife sheath that yuh left on Newhall's belt wove itself in a rope to hang yuh."

The lanky waddy's lips puckered into that low whistle which was his way of expressing astonishment. And also admiration for the Sheriff who dominated them all from the back of the sleek gelding.

"Well now," the waddy said, "it was a slick scheme. And it's lucky for me that there was a slicker Sheriff to see through it. Wonder what Bertram'll say when he hears?"

Steele holstered his Colt to reach for cigarette makings.

"Reckon he'll congratulate yuh, along with the rest of us, Kester," he said. "Because that brand mixup up Jackson Hole way was straightened out long ago, the culprit captured. So the Sheriff up there wrote to me, at the same time furnishin' a description that tallies with yore appearance."

It was the first time anybody in the Painted Post country had called the lanky waddy by name. He choked up a little as he said:

"Sheriff, I hope I live long enough to pay yuh back for all this!"

The beaten killer, writhing against the corral gate at the point of his own six-gun in Shorty's hand, exclaimed in a voice husky with hate:

"And I hope the same!"

As he licked a cigarette shut, Steele's quick eyes lifted above and past the small group in front of him, to a familiar figure on a moon-gray coming upslope towards the bench spread.

"I don't reckon yuh will, Hardin. Here comes Judge Bertram. He holds court most any old place, the Judge does. Kester, how'd yuh like to get out yore uncle's old lasso-rope and hang it from a barn rafter?"

●

Next Issue's Sheriff Steele Novelet: SHORT HORSE AND LONG COLT

BOWDRIE RIDES A COYOTE TRAIL

By
LOUIS L'AMOUR

A dead man leads a Ranger on the trail of the killer who ramrods a range feud!

THE slim, broad shouldered young man with the dark, Apache face was riding warily. Only a moment before he had been dozing in the saddle, weary after the long miles behind, and then a sudden tensing of the hammer-head roan he was riding snapped him out of it.

Tipping the black, flat crowned hat lower over his eyes, he studied the terrain with the shrewd, all seeing eyes of a man who looked that he might live. His legs, sensitive to every move of the horse he bestrode, had warned him. If he needed more, he had only to look at the roan's ears, tipped forward now.

The mountain horse was uneasy. There was something on the wind that disturbed his sensitive nostrils. Soft footing it along the dusty cattle trail, he approached the grove of trees with wary attention, as did the man in the saddle.

Chick Bowdrie let his right hand drop back to loosen the thong that held his six-gun in place on longs rides. First the right hand gun, then the left. There was no change in expression, only the dimple-like scar under his right cheek bone seemed to deepen and his eyes grow more intent.

He was skirting the tumbled and deeply creased foothills of a high, mountain-

"Drop it!" Bowdrie said sharply

ous and tree-clad ridge. The foothills were dotted here and there with occasional groves, scattered trees, and gigantic, widely strewn boulders. Farther on the foothills dropped away to lose themselves in a long green gray valley that rolled to purple distant mountains.

The roan, stepping daintily, head bobbing, walked into the trees. Chick dropped a hand to the reins.

"Hold it, Boy," he said softly, as he saw the still figure on the ground.

Sitting his horse, his black eyes sharply surveying the opening among the trees, Chick dug into the pocket of his worn buckskin vest for the makin's and began to roll a smoke.

The man on the ground beside the trail was dead. It did not require an examination to prove that. No man could take a bullet where he had taken this one without dying. Also, he was lying on his back with the sun in his eyes.

NO TRACKS showed near the body except of the dead man's own horse which stood nearby. From the size of the hole in the man's chest the bullet had gone in from behind. Chick turned in the saddle, measuring the distance, and his eyes found a huge, brush surrounded boulder some fifty yards away.

Point blank range. The killer wasn't taking any chances. Chick Bowdrie still sat his horse. The killer had been smart to be careful. That hombre on the ground looked plumb salty. It was a good-looking face, but one showing grim purpose. Even in death he looked a man to be reckoned with. The two tied-down guns, worn with handling, completed the picture.

Chick's eyes dropped to the chain loops hanging down from the strap button of the dead man's spurs. He looked at them thoughtfully, then lifted his eyes to the horse, taking in the ornate Santa Barbara bit and the elaborate, hand tooled tapaderos.

"California," Chick muttered. "He come a long way to get killed."

Dismounting, he walked over to the horse. It shied a bit, but when he spoke it reached for him with its nose, curious and friendly.

"I reckon," Chick said, "yore rider was an all right hombre. You ain't been abused none, bein' plumb friendly like this."

He scratched the horse idly on the neck, frowning with thought. His eyes strayed to the rawhide riata hanging from a loop near the pommel. His eyes sparkled with interest.

"Eighty or eighty-five feet, I'll gamble!" he said. "California, you was a *hand!*"

He'd heard of those long rawhide riata and what the California riders could do with them. In Texas, they stuck to hair ropes rarely more than half that length and they worked close to a steer before making a toss. It took an artist to handle a rope as long as this, and not many men could do it.

Turning, he walked to the dead man and went through his pockets. Dust was heavy on the dead man's clothes. He had ridden far and fast. The horse showed it too. He was a tall black, heavier than most Texas cow horses, obviously well-bred and c a r e f u l l y trained. He was a horse who could stand miles of hard riding and by the look of him, had stood them.

"California," Chick said thoughtfully, "I reckon you was ridin' to see somebody. You was sure enough in a powerful hurry, and by the look of you and them guns you never *ran* a step from anythin'!"

Making a neat pack of the man's pocket articles, Chick stowed them in his hip pocket. Then he took the dead rider's guns and slung the belts from his saddle horn.

It was too far to carry a body, and there would be coyotes.

"I mean the four legged kind," Chick told the dead man, "you had yore takin' of the two legged variety."

He found a shallow place where the ground was soft, dug a little with a stick and laid the body into the slight trench. Covering the rider's face with his vest, Chick scraped dirt over him, then piled on juniper bows and covered them with stones.

When he swung into the saddle again he was leading the black horse. Swinging around, he walked the roam toward the boulder in the brush.

A minute and painstaking examination told him little. He was about to leave when he saw the place where the killer's horse had been tethered. Something caught his eye and he studied the rough side of the rock, scowling.

The horse had waited some little time,

judging by the hoof marks, and evidently had tried to scratch himself on the rock. Chick took several tiny fragments of wood from the rough surface. Dry and hard on one side, they were fresh and unweathered on the other. Carefully, he picked off several of the bits of wood, scarcely more than shreds, and put them in a cigarette paper.

Hours later, when the shadows from the peaks reached out toward the little cowtown of Hacker, Chick Bowdrie ambled the roan down the dusty street toward the livery stable. The black trotted behind.

Sitting in a chair against the saloon wall was a man who watched him curiously. The man turned his head slightly toward the saloon doors and must have spoken, for a moment later the doors pushed wide and a big man in a white hat stepped out and watched Chick ride by.

Stabling the horses, Chick rubbed them down carefully, fed and watered them with his own hand. The stable hand walked over, chewing methodically, and watched him.

"Come far?" he asked finally.

"Uh huh," Chick replied. "Quite a piece. What's doin' around town?"

"Nothin' much." He looked at Chick's lean, hard young face, then at his guns. "Huntin' a job?"

"Could be. What's up?"

"Hermann and Howells are hirin'. If a man's handy with a six-gun it don't hurt none."

"There's two sides to a fight. What about the other?"

"Jack Darcy. Pitchfork outfit. Young sprout, but he ain't hirin' gun hands. No money." The liveryman's eyes strayed to the black horse. "Yuh usually carry two hosses?"

"Sometimes," Chick straightened and his black eyes looked into the stableman's. "Yuh askin' for yoreself, or gittin' news for somebody?"

THE man shrugged. "Just askin'." He looked up, spat, and nodded his head toward the black. "You're a Texas man, but that black ain't no Texas hoss, and that saddle rig ain't no Texas saddle."

"That'll give yuh somethin' to keep yuh from sleepin' too sound," Chick said dryly. "Somethin' to think about, Rainy."

The liveryman's head jerked up, showing his astonishment.

"How'd yuh know my name?" he demanded in surprise.

"A man's got to keep his eyes open, Rainy," Chick said. "When I rode up out there you was diggin' tobaccy out of yore pouch. Yore name's burned on it."

The stable keeper looked foolish with his mouth hanging open as Chick turned away.

Bowdrie walked up the street, judging the town. It was like any western cowtown. Quiet, weather-beaten and wind-blasted, a few horses at the hitching rails, a stray dog or two, a half dozen saloons showing the only lights except for the hotel and adjoining cafe. It was a town deceptively dead. A wrong word and it could explode into action.

Chick went into the cafe after he got a room at the two story frame hotel. Ordering, he sat at a long wooden table and ate in silence. The slatternly woman who served him manifested on interest in the silent, leather-faced young man with the tied down guns.

He chewed thoughtfully, thinking about the job he had to do. Somewhere in the town of Hacker or beyond was a cow stealing killer known as Cart Dyson. He was wanted in Texas for murder. Chick had been working out the man's carefully concealed trail now for a month.

He was sitting over his coffee when Rainy came in and slumped into a seat across the table. The square-faced man had no more expression than Bowdrie. Picking up the pot he poured out a cup of coffee, black and strong.

"Couple of gents lookin' yore gear over," he said, staring into his cup. "Figgered yuh might like to know. One of them is Russ Peters, gunhand for the H and H outfit. The other was Murray Roberts, ramroddin' for H and H."

"Thanks." Chick pushed back from the table and got up. "Where do they hang out?"

"Wagon Wheel saloon mostly. Better watch them sidewinders, Mister. They are plumb poison." Rainy's range-wise eyes dropped to Chick's tied down guns as the Ranger went out the door. "Or," he added dryly, "maybe they better watch out!"

Several poker games were in progress in the Wagon Wheel, a few punchers

were casually bucking a faro layout, and four men stood at the bar. One was a tall, fine looking man in a white hat, and neat range clothes. Another was shorter, heavier and carelessly dressed with a brutal, unshaven face and black mustache. He wore a low crowned sombrero creased through the middle.

His eyes followed Chick to the bar, as Bowdrie entered and he muttered something under his breath to the man in the white hat. The big man shot a glance at Chick from the corners of his eyes and went on talking.

"Darcy," he was saying, "better sell while the sellin' is good. He won't have nothin' left if this keeps on."

The man with the creased sombrero stared at Chick.

"Right nice hoss yuh led into town, Stranger," he said. "Reckon a good many hombres are wonderin' what become of the rider."

Chick turned slowly. His left elbow rested on the bar, his right hand held a glass of rye. The black eyes stared into the yellow eyes of the man in the creased sombrero, and somebody in the room swallowed audibly. Menace seemed to rise like a cloud into the smoke laden air of the saloon.

Bowdrie's Apache face did not change. Still staring coldly, he lifted his glass slowly and drained the rye. Then he put the glass back on the bar. The tension in the room was almost a live thing, and the studied moves of the dark young man at the bar awakened something in the minds of the onlookers.

"I said," the man declared again, "a lot of folks want to know what become of the rider!"

Chick's eyes held steady, then slowly he spoke.

"The name is Russ Peters," he said, making it clear he meant the man he faced. "Used to call himself Rusty Padwill. Fancies himself a gun-slinger, but always careful who he does his shootin' with. Ran with the Murphy Dolan crowd in the Lincoln County war, wanted in Colorado for hoss stealin', suspected of dry gulchin' a prospector in Arizony. Run out of Tombstone by Wyatt Earp."

Peters' mouth fell open but Chick Bowdrie continued to speak.

"I might add, that the hombre that rode that horse was drygulched," he went on, "I reckon in every town the folks know the party most likely to shoot another man in the back!"

PETERS snapped out of his trance, and his face went white, then red.

"Meanin'?" he snarled.

"Meanin'," Chick said, "when yuh throw a stone into a pack of dogs, the one that yelps is the one that got hit!"

"Why, you—" Peters lunged, grabbing at Chick with a powerful left hand.

Bowdrie brushed the hand away and suddenly turning on the balls of his feet he snapped a right uppercut that cracked like a whiplash on the corner of Peters' jaw. Peters' knees buckled suddenly and he toppled forward on his face.

Chick glanced at the astonished bartender.

"I'll take another," he said, "ridin's kind of dry."

Peters pulled himself to his knees and realization struck him like a blow. With a muffled grunt he lunged to his feet, clawing for his gun. He got his hand on it and started to draw, then froze in ludicrous amazement, his Colt half out. He was looking into the the unwavering muzzle of Chick Bowdrie's gun, held carelessly at his hip. Bowdrie's other hand still gripped his glass.

"Let's not be shootin'," Chick drawled. "I ain't in no mood fer killin' coyotes tonight. Yuh better fork yore hoss, Peters, and head for the home ranch. This ain't yore night."

Russ Peters let go of his gun-butt like it was red hot and took two steps back, watching Bowdrie's gun. Then he turned and went through the door with a rush.

Murray Roberts laughed. "Reckon that tip off on Peters is appreciated, Stranger. Didn't have no idea he was an owl hooter." He glanced at the tied down guns, and then his eyes lifted, they were chill, pale eyes. "Reckon yuh must have cut a wide swath where yuh come from. Where'd yuh say it was?"

"I didn't say," Chick's voice was flat.

"If yore job huntin', drop out t' the H and H. We need men."

Chick drained his glass. "If Peters is a sample of what yuh got," he said, "I reckon you do!"

He turned on his heel and walked out, leaving Roberts' eyes wide and his face suddenly ugly with anger.

Bowdrie was on the hotel porch when

he saw a dark figure detach itself from the shadow. He flattened against a post and his gun slid into his hand.

"Hold it!" A short, blonde young man stepped into the light from the door. "I'm friendly!"

"All right," Chick holstered his gun. "You're talkin'."

Inside, they faced each other in the hotel lobby. Chick's black eyes dropped over the worn boots, jeans stuffed into them, the broad belt, one gun, and the black checkered shirt and unbuttoned vest. The fellow had a friendly, attractive face and a ready grin.

"You led a black hoss into town—with a Californy rig?"

"Uh huh."

"What happened to the rider?"

"Drygulched, about ten mile south. Shot in the back. Know him?"

"Yeah, he was my friend." The young man looked up. "I'm Jack Darcy, of the Pitchfork." His face suddenly showed its weariness. "That was Dan Lingle. He was ridin' up here to lend me a hand in this war."

Chick's eyes sharpened. "Dan Lingle? The lawman? The hombre that shot up the Skull Canyon crowd?"

"Uh huh. What beats me is why they should shoot him." Darcy's face was puzzled. "Nobody knew he was comin'. Nobody even knew I knew him. Lingle," he added, "was my brother-in-law. Then my sister was killed."

"Killed?" Chick's dark eyes narrowed. "How?"

"Some hand she hired while Dan was away. She caught him stealing everythin' on the place. He knocked her down. In falling she hit her head and died. Dan knowed the man by sight, howsoever, and he was still huntin' him."

"When'd yore war begin?" Chick said suddenly, changing the subject. "Tell me about it."

"Well," Darcy said, "we was gittin' along pretty good, me and the H and H. In fact," he flushed painfully, "sort of figgered Meg Howells and me was goin' to marry up.

"Then this Murray Roberts come in. He hires out to Howells and afore long he's got Hermann and Howells hatin' me. He showed 'em some doctored brands. I never rustled a H and H cow in my life! Then he starts courtin' Meg, an' they run me off the place.

"I ain't no gun-slinger. Murray drawed on me and busted my arm. If Meg hadn't grabbed Murray, I reckon he'd a drilled me plumb center. Then she claimed it was my fault and told me not to come back."

Chick nodded, broodingly. "How long's Roberts been here?"

"Him?" Darcy shrugged. "'Bout six months, seems like. That sidekick of his, Russ Peters, he ain't been here but about a month, or a little more."

"Six months?" Disappointment showed in Chick's voice. Then he turned toward the stairway. "I'm ridin' yore way tomorrow, Darcy. Reckon I'll put up with you for the night. Maybe we can make a deal. Maybe I ain't the man Dan Lingle was, but—"

"Gosh a'mighty!" Darcy said, his grin spreading across his face. "Come ahead, Man! I'd sure like to have you!" He turned to go, then stopped. "You didn't say what yore name was?"

Chick paused and turned. He was conscious of the man at the desk staring at him and knew the hotel clerk was listening.

"My name's Chick Bowdrie," he said.

"*Chick Bowdrie!* The Ranger?" Darcy's voice was filled with awe. "Gosh, Man! I heard of you, just plenty!"

He stared after Chick, his eyes wide, as Bowdrie went up the stairs then Darcy turned and went out. Gazing after him, the deskman waited until the sound of horse's hooves pounded down the street, then he turned and ran to the door. He had scarcely gone out when Chick tiptoed gently down the stairs. He was smiling.

Five minutes later, outside the window of a house at the other end of town, he watched and listened as the deskman babbled his story to Murray Roberts, Russ Peters, and a short, heavy-set man with a bald head and a thick cigar.

"Chick Bowdrie, is it?" Murray Roberts' pale eyes were dangerous. "That means we've either got to kill him or we're through!"

"Then we'll kill him!" The fat man said quietly. "If you and me are goin' to run things here, Roberts, we'll have to get him. Afterward we can take care of the others!"

The fat man stared at Murray, looking like an enormous toad as he sat there.

"Who killed Lingle, Murray?" he demanded.

Roberts flushed.

"Not me!" he protested.

"Well, it wasn't me!" Russ broke in. "Durned if I know!"

"Murray," the fat man said, "you ride back to the ranch. I'll keep Russ here. You ride herd on the old man. Can't let him get wise now. And watch him, not that girl. Women'll be the death of you, yet!"

Thoughtfully, Chick wandered back to the hotel and crawled into bed. Never any simple cases any more. They had to start a hombre out huntin' a killer with no accurate description. Nothing but the fact he was carrying two diamond rings and a watch taken from a woman he killed, and four beautiful Morgan horses. A stallion and three brood mares.

Chick's trail had been cold when he started, but he had worked it out carefully. One thing he knew. The killer, Cart Dyson, had sold no Morgan horses. He had them with him, wherever he was.

"I reckon," Chick muttered, half asleep, "I better check them ranches tomorrow."

The big H and H spread lay six miles west of Hacker, and Chick Bowdrie, who was an early riser, made it by a few minutes after daylight. He reined in among some rock cedar at the end of a long hill and looked down on the ranch.

It was enough to make a cattleman dream. For miles upon miles gray-green and rolling range spread out like a great sea behind the cluster of ranch buildings. And there were cattle. As far as a man could see on a clear morning, there were cattle, scattered over the valley, gathered along the stream that watered it.

Over against the foothills he could see the Pitchfork buildings. Inquiries that morning had told him much. The Pitchfork cattle grazed back up the numerous draws into the foothills, well watered draws that lacked the imposing spread of the H and H, but were excellent grass country.

IT WAS only within the past year that trouble had arisen, a little at first, then mounting to a head. H and H cattle had been missed, brands had been blotted, and Rack Hermann had believed Jack Darcy was rustling. Then Murray Roberts had come in, become foreman, and complaints against the Darcy ranch had grown until there had been harsh words, and then a Darcy hand was reported to have killed an H and H rider.

Chick studied the situation thoughtfully. Nobody had seen that H and H rider killed. He had been found near Pitchfork range, shot through the back. The H and H had killed a Pitchfork rider, and then H and H began hiring gunmen.

"It looks," Chick muttered, "like somebody wanted trouble."

Yet that trouble started before Murray Roberts had hit Hacker or the H and H. So he couldn't be the cause of it—or could he?

The hands were riding out from the H and H now. He sat his horse, watching them go. The fewer around for what he had to do, the better. Finally, he started the roan and trotted down the trail toward the ranch.

A girl came running down the steps as he rode up, chasing some chickens away from a flower bed. Her blonde hair blew in the wind, and when she saw him, she stopped suddenly, shading her eyes toward him.

He pulled in and leaned his forearms on the saddle horn.

"Howdy, Ma'am," he said pleasantly. "How's for a mite of coffee?"

"Why," he could see curiosity in her eyes, "yes, I think there's some left. Will you come in?"

He swung down, ground hitched the roan, and followed her into the dining room. The Chinese cook was just cleaning up the mess left by the cowhands, and at a word he brought hot coffee.

"You'll be Meg Howells," Chick said abruptly.

"Yes," she was studying his face, obviously puzzled. "How did you know?"

"Why," he said blandly, "I run into a young feller down to Hacker who spent a couple of hours tellin' me how you was the purtiest gal in these parts. He sure wa'nt no liar."

"Oh? You mean Murray?" she asked quickly.

He swallowed some coffee, and picked up a huge chunk of cake.

"No, Ma'am, I mean Jack Darcy."

"Oh?" Her voice was cool. "How is he?"

She tried to keep her voice even and distant, but underneath it lay a warm thread of interest.

"Looks a might peaked," he said, "like

maybe things was goin' bad at the ranch, or he lost his best gal, or somethin'." Before she could respond to that, he hurried on. "Of course, he did lose his best friend."

"Jack did? How?" Meg's eyes were wide.

"Chap named Dan Lingle. Mighty fine man. I'd heard a plenty about Dan Lingle. Powerful fine man, law officer out Californy way. He was ridin' in here to see Jack an' somebody drygulched him. Shot him in the back."

"How awful!" Her eyes were wide. "Why, that's terrible! Why, that's how Jack's—!"

She hesitated, and a little frown gathered between her eyes.

"How Jack's what?" Chick looked at her keenly.

He was no judge of womenfolks. It wasn't like reading trail sign. They made queer tracks. Yet even he could sense Meg Howells had something on her mind.

"Why," she said hesitantly, Jack's father was killed that way. Only he was after rustlers. That was about eight months ago. They found him shot in the back lying beside the trail."

"Who are you?" She looked at him intently. "What are you doing here? You don't look like a cowhand."

"No," he looked straight into her eyes, "I'm not. I'm a Ranger. I'm lookin' for a human coyote what murdered a woman he'd just married, then drove off her cattle. Told everybody he was migratin' west, that his wife was sick in the covered wagon, but after he was gone they found her body. He took her rings, some her father give her, and four mighty fine blooded horses."

"Four horses?" Her eyes were wide.

"Yes, Ma'am," he watched her keenly, "a stallion and three mares. Fine stock. You seen any such horses, Ma'am?"

"No, she said, "no, I haven't."

She seemed suddenly eager to be rid of him, and he pushed back his chair and got up.

"Mind if I look around a bit?" he asked. "You got a might fine hacienda here."

"No, of course not! Go right ahead!"

She was already hurrying from the room. He picked up another slab of cake and walked outside, his eyes shrewd and calculating. Taking his time, he ambled slowly toward the stable.

WHEN he saw the row of extra saddles on a railing his lips tightened.

"Somewhere," he told himself, "you're goin' to find a saddle with wooden, California style stirrups. Real old timy stuff. And some of the wood will have been rubbed off recent—on a rock!"

Yet a few minutes' search sufficed to show that no such saddle was in this bunch. He was just straightening up when a harsh voice cut the silence. A voice that sent little prickles along the back of his neck.

"Who are you, and what yuh doin' prowlin' around here?"

Chick straightened slowly, and turned. His face was blank, Indian like.

"Just lookin' around," he said quietly, "I asked Miss Meg if'd be all right."

"Well, it isn't all right." He was short, enormously fat man, a man with a thick neck lifting from a massive width of shoulder.

Watching him, Chick was suddenly wary. This man was not only fat. In his movements there was a practiced dexterity, a smoothness that belied his bulk. The man was easily two inches shorter than he, but must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

"You want to look this ranch over, yuh come to me!" the fat man said.

"I heard," Chick said, rolling a smoke, "that this place belonged to Howells and Hermann?"

"Well," the fat man snapped, "I'm Rack Hermann!"

"Yeah?" Chick studied the man. Suddenly all the antagonism within him seemed to rise to the surface. There was something about this man that got under his skin. "From the way you talked I figgered you was both of them!"

Hermann's eyes narrowed and his face tightened. Suddenly, the easy appearing fat man seemed to vanish, and the face Chick looked at was brutal.

"Think I'm just a fat slob, do you?" Hermann snapped. His tongue touched his lips and into his eyes came a queer eagerness, an eagerness that made Chick cringe inwardly as though he had suddenly touched something unclean. "I like to beat clever fellers like you!"

"Hold it, Boss," Murray Roberts had appeared in the doorway behind Hermann. "That's Chick Bowdrie!"

Rack Hermann stopped in midstride and his face was suddenly suffused with

smiles. It seemed impossible that the ugly light could vanish from those small eyes so quickly.

"Bowdrie? Man, why didn't yuh say so? I figgered yuh was just some driftin' cowhand lookin' fer somethin' he could steal! Shucks, if I'd knowed you was the law—Come on up to the house, will you?"

Chick smiled and shook his head.

"No," he said, "I've got some ridin' to do. I might drop in on my way back, though."

"Shore!" Hermann was all genialty and smiles now. "Glad to have yuh any time!"

Chick Bowdrie walked out to his horse and swung into the saddle. He turned his horse toward the Darcy range, and when away from the house, he passed a hand over his brow.

"That, Chick," he said softly, "was a close one!"

Suddenly he was very thoughtful. Rack Hermann was a new element in the plan. The rancher was no tin-horn crook, he was a monster, a thing of such evil as the western range rarely bred. He was a spider, a huge, bloated thing plotting and spinning and thinking.

Movement caught Chick's eye. Turning his head, he saw Meg Howells, on a small gray horse, slipping away from the ranch. Without changing his own course, he watched her. She was heading for the hills. Circling through the trees, out of sight of the H and H, he swung until he cut her trail, then he fell in behind. The girl was riding fast, and she was going somewhere.

Glancing down his back trail, he saw another rider whose route had not intersected his as yet. Hurriedly, Chick pulled back off the trail until the horseman passed. It was Murray Roberts.

The trail was rough and dusty, but fearing to raise a cloud and be seen, Chick held to the grassy side of the trail. It was simple enough by using the terrain, to keep out of sight until suddenly Meg rode up a low hill and down through a cleft in the rock wall.

Until now she had been riding an obviously known trail. With the entry into the notch in the rock, Chick could see the girl was uncertain. She rode cautiously and paused often, yet she kept on riding.

Pulling the roan to a stop, Chick watched Murray Roberts allow the girl some time before he entered the cleft. Yet somehow he had the impression this was no new trail for Roberts.

WAITING approximately as long as Roberts had, Chick turned the roan through the cleft.

It grew narrower and narrower until at one point the sides of his boots rubbed the rock on either wall, then it widened again. Far ahead he could see the girl riding out into a green and verdant box canyon. Beyond he could see cottonwoods and a small cabin. There was a corral, and in the corral, were horses.

Suddenly, his eyes sharpened. Instinct told him what he would find here, and with that instinctive awareness, his sense of danger heightened. Roberts was just ahead, but now he was spurring his horse to catch the girl.

Chick Bowdrie rode down from the notch and turned abruptly right into some low brush along the rock wall. He followed along, then rode from the brush toward the cabin. He dismounted behind a ramshackle barn and eased to the corner. Peering around it, he saw there were four horses in the corral.

The Morgan horses! Then Roberts—He heard voices. Murray Roberts' voice.

"How'd y' know about this place?" he demanded.

"I was suspicious," Meg was saying. "I saw you ride this way. Later I saw him coming here. I didn't know what was here, but I had to find out."

"Now you found out, yuh better git, and quick!" Roberts said huskily. "If he finds yuh here, he'll kill you shore!" He was silent a moment. "Meg, let's light out! You and me! Nobody's got a chance with him around! He killed—"

"Who did I kill?"

The voice was so close that Chick jumped like he was stung. Then he realized the voice came from the barn door, from the front of the building behind which he was hiding.

"Rack!" Roberts yelped. "You here? I thought—" Fright choked Roberts' voice.

"You thought I was back at the ranch, didn't yuh?" Rack Hermann sneered. "You didn't think I'd have a place like this without two ways in and out did you? As for you, Roberts, I knowed yuh was a weak sister! Gone soft on the girl, too!

"I've seen this comin' fer a long time! I knowed the time would come when I'd have you to kill! Ain't no good to me now, anyway! I got the ranch! Good as got the valley. And nobody even suspects Rack Hermann! They suspect you, Roberts! An' they suspect Russ Peters! Well, I've killed him back at the ranch, now I'll git you!" He laughed harshly. "Then they'll all say I'm a public benefactor for riddin' the country of you!"

"Rack!" Roberts protested. "You can't do this! I—"

"You're soft, Roberts! That's why I done my own killin'! Sure, Meg!" he chuckled deep in his fat throat. "I killed old man Darcy! I killed that slick gunhand Dan Lingle, too! And your father's dyin' now. He knows, too! He was smart enough to figger what was happenin', but afraid for you, so he said nothin'! I knowed you knew about these hosses I brung back from my Texas trip! I sat back in the rocks and watched you!"

Murray Roberts' voice was choked and harsh.

"I been a outlaw," he declared, "but I never been the skunk you been, Hermann!"

Chick had stepped around the corner, and he was just in time to see what happened. Murray's hand dropped suddenly for his gun. What happened was so incredibly swift that even Chick Bowdrie felt a shock of surprise—for Rack Hermann's hand dropped with the speed of a striking snake and his gun came up spitting lead.

He centered three shots over Roberts' belt buckle so fast that they seemed a continuous report, and Murray, his face writhing with pain, started to fall. Yet even as he fell, and even as Hermann pounded two more shots into him, Roberts kept dragging his iron. He got off one shot, and it plowed into the sand at Hermann's feet.

Rack thumbed shells from his belt, but before he could load Chick Bowdrie spoke.

"Drop it!" he said sharply. "Drop that gun, Rack, or you'll take just what Roberts got!"

Meg gave a little moan of happiness and fear, and he saw the girl back to the corral, her face white.

Rack Hermann turned slowly, the gun slipping from his fingers, the falling shells making little puffs of dust.

"*You!*" Rack snarled. "If yuh didn't have that gun, I'd kill you!"

What made him do it, Chick never knew. Suddenly, he unbuckled his belts and tossed them to the girl.

"Don't shoot," he said calmly, "unless it's to save yourself! I'm goin' to give this bag of blubber a proper whippin'!"

Rack's face seemed to swell with unholy joy, he stretched his big hands, and grinned.

"Wait 'til I git these on you!" he gloated. "You don't know what power is!"

HE MOVED in. No rush, just a steady moving in and a wary circling. Bowdrie knew he was in for the fight of his life, and it was a fight where only death could make an end. Rack circled, then moved in, and Chick lashed out with a left. The fat man's bullet head moved, and the blow missed, and then, incredibly fast, Hermann closed in.

A smashing blow caught Bowdrie in the wind, then a sledge hammer fist smashed against the side of his jaw. A great light burst somewhere and he felt himself falling, and he heard Hermann's grunt of triumph.

Then his knees were in the dust and he saw Rack closing in. Chick lunged to his feet, and Rack moved in, yet as he moved Chick weaved and lashed again with a left. It missed, but the right that followed was straight and hard. Too high! It mashed Hermann's lips back into his teeth and started a trickle of blood down his chin.

He didn't stop. He moved on in and again those big fists moved. Left and right. Bowdrie tried to duck but they were too swift, and the left smashed on his chin, the right caught him on the ear, he started to fall, then threw a right and felt it connect, hard.

How he got through those next few minutes he never knew. Blows battered and pounded. His head rang with the power of them, and his breath came in great gasps. One eye was closed and he was staggering, half blinded and beaten with those lashing fists, yet somehow he was staying on his feet, and suddenly through the fog across his consciousness he realized there was desperation in the bigger man.

For Rack Hermann was breathing heavily. Powerful he might be. His

strength almost unlimited, yet he was packing a huge weight, and the sun was hot. Chick, dried by desert suns and long hot winds, was lean as an ironwood tree and just as tough.

It came to him suddenly, came to him through the fog in his brain and the blood taste in his mouth that he could win. From deep within him he drew on a well of desperation, and suddenly, he began to punch.

Left, right, left, right, left—blow after battering blow he pounded in that huge body and that wide, flat face. His arms were weary and he seemed beaten down, dragged out, he seemed unable to hold up his arms, and the breath ripped at his lungs like a jagged sword, but he kept on punching, he punched and battered, and blood stained his fists and splattered against his shirt, but he kept on punching. Once he had the big man backed into the barn wall and for a long time he held him there, slugging with both hands.

Then suddenly there was nobody in front of him, and he could hear Meg crying, and Jack Darcy was there, and Rainy.

"Stop it, Man! Stop it!" They shouted in his ears. "He's half dead now! You'll kill him!"

Then they were holding him and he was trembling in every limb, and through the fog of punch drunkeness and the taste of blood he could see Rack Hermann, the man who had called himself Cart Dyson, stretched in the dust, bloody and beaten. Chick knew he would no longer need to search for the saddle he'd hoped to find.

"You?" he stared at Rainy, puzzled. "What you doin' here?"

"I was the hombre what wanted to marry Jack's sister," Rainy said. "Dan Lingle beat me out. I never held no grudge again Lingle, so I come on here to see Darcy. I knowed the killer was somewheres around."

"That was the first one. There was another in Texas," Chick said. He wiped blood from his battered face. Then he took his guns from the girl and strapped them on.

Jack Darcy had his arm around Meg and they were walking away.

"Let's git this carcass on a hoss," Chick said. "He'll live to hang!"

"After yuh take him back, why don't you come out here?" Rainy asked. "There's a sight of first-rate range over the mountain!"

Chick Bowdrie chuckled and slapped the dust from his hat.

"I'm a Texas Ranger, man. There's always work for a Ranger!"

Western Distances and Sounds

MOST everybody who goes out West these days to live, to vacation, or just to make sure there is such a critter as a cowboy, knows that a man can see almost fifty or sixty miles. That's because the atmosphere is so fine and clear and rarefied. You can spot an automobile on the road sixty miles away, and you can see horses grazing so far away that it's almost unbelievable.

The corny old joke about this "far-sightedness" always deals with a tenderfoot deciding to walk to a "nearby" (?) mountain, and after keeping at it for two days, giving the journey up.

But here's one thing that a lot of folks don't know about the West. When it gets real cold—say, about forty or fifty below—up in Northern Montana, and on a day when there is no wind at all, a man can sit in his cabin and talk with a neighbor a couple of miles away. Sound carries that far, and we're not fooling.

When a tenderfoot goes to Northern Montana in the wintertime, he has to be awfully careful about what he says—whether talking to his wife or to himself.—*Bill Anson.*

By
J. E. GRINSTEAD

THE BUTTON

CHAPTER I

Death Camp

THE Button was eating dust. That was no novelty to him. He had eaten dust for six years. With his old hat pulled low, wearing brush-tattered garments, and boots so worn they would barely hold his spurs, he slouched low in his saddle, riding with short stirrups and his legs crooked.

The casual observer would have said he was twelve years old, and would have missed it by six years. There was a thick down on his face, and the white dust raised by his outfit had settled on the down and in his hair, and he looked, more than anything else, like a very aged Billikin.

The little outfit was heading west along the old San Antonio trail which ran like a gray ribbon through the pear thickets. There had been no rain for many months, and dust was deep, appearing liquid until stirred up by the horses' feet.

When Gunnies Raid and Burn a Ranch, They

He woke up with a start, and three men were looking down at him

TAKES THE TRAIL

An Action Novelet

The Button knew enough to push up close to the two men who rode abreast just ahead of him. There was a light breeze, and it blew their dust behind him before it had time to raise. They were all eating the dust of two pack-ponies that trotted ahead, carrying the bed-rolls, camp kit and groceries. That was all of the outfit.

The two men were tall, rawboned fellows, and identical twins. Jim and Bob Yeager were a queer pair. Bob was a widower and Jim a bachelor. Very few people knew it, but the Button was Bob Yeager's son. Button knew he had a regular first name, but he rarely thought of it. He was always called Button, or referred to as the Button. Most people supposed that he was just some boy that the two men had picked up as a flunkey. He lived at the ranch cabin with them, and was always with them. The truth was that Button's mother had died when he was twelve. He could not be left alone at the ranch for days together, so the men took care of him by taking him

along. He was now as good a cowhand as there was in the outfit—better than most—but to everybody he was still the Button.

USUALLY, the Yeager boys talked about as much as a Chinese Idol, but when they did talk they never paid any attention to the Button. Neither of them had spoken for an hour. Then Jim spat the dust out of his mouth.

"Bob," he said, "I been thinking some. We got the land all paid out, and this money we got is clean velvet." He glanced down at his saddlehorn and the *morral* which hung from it. The *morral* contained the silver and gold money they had received for a herd of cattle they had just driven to San Antonio. The *morral* was just a plain nose-bag for feeding a horse, and someone had drawn the ranch's Y Bar brand on one side of it with some black grease from a wagon hub.

"I been thinking," Jim Yeager went on in his dust-husky voice, "we ought to take some of that money and send Button to school. He's such a little wart that he can't do any good ranching. He's got a good head on him, and might do right smart as a lawyer, or something like that."

"Dunno about that," grunted Bob. "His mother taught him more book-schoolin' by the time he was twelve than you and me ever had, and we got along. He has got a good head on him. He can beat you or me, ary one, right now at ciphering. He ciphers things out clean on ahead of him. Seems to me we ought to take this money and buy some more land while it's cheap. We can talk about it some more, but right now— Hey! Look at them packers. They got their heads up and are stretching their laigs like they are goin' to town, 'stead of back to the ranch."

"Smell water," said Jim.

The two packers went out of sight around a bend in the trail, with its wall of tall prickly pear on each side. Button had heard everything the men had said, but he gave no sign of it. He just went on eating dust.

When they turned the bend in the trail they saw the sun glinting on a water-hole, with the packers at the edge of the great pool drinking.

"Huh," grunted Bob Yeager. "This is last water until we get home. Sun ain't quite down, and we could go some farther, but I reckon we better camp here. Then we can start early in the morning and make it in by a little after noon. It's only thirty miles."

"All right," said Jim.

It was after supper, and beginning to turn dark. Jim and Bob had spread their blankets. They sat down on them and removed the boots from their hot feet. Button was half wild, and always hid his saddle and bridle and his bed-roll in a nearby thicket when in camp, to keep some of the hands from stealing the strings off his saddle, or the like. He wore a gun, and could sling it, but it was heavy and he had taken it off and hid it up with his saddle.

Now he was squatting by the fire, looking more than ever like a Billiken smoking a cigarette.

Bob Yeager reached over and dipped some water out of the bucket with a tin cup. He took a swallow into his mouth and spat it out.

"This water here at the lower end of the hole is plumb tainted and awful," he said. "Button, they's a seep spring coupla hundred yards up this side of the pool. Take the bucket and go up there. You can get some water that is fitten to drink."

Without a word, Button poured the tainted water out of the bucket and set off for the spring, following the edge of the pool to keep out of the pear thickets. Just before he reached the spring, he stumbled across a deep-worn trail.

There was very little that escaped the steady, clear gray eyes of the Button. He flashed a match to locate the spring, and also looked down at the trail. It was full of horse tracks. He made the mental note that wild horses had more sense than tame ones. They came down to this spring, and drank clean, cool water.

He filled his bucket, and turned back toward the camp. He got about halfway, and stopped suddenly. Riders were coming in from the direction of the Y Bar. That was not usual. Men rode that trail at all hours.

His quick ear told him that there were only three of them, and he walked on toward the camp.

"Light, gents," he heard Bob Yeager say, "and let yo' saddles rest. There's coffee in the pot, and a little grub left."

Then two shots crashed, almost as one.

BUTTON sprang into the thicket that stood between him and the camp, then crept forward to see what had happened. He was not more than fifty feet from the camp. The mesquite wood on the fire was blazing up brightly, and through a tiny opening in the thicket he could see the camp plainly.

Jim and Bob lay on their blankets, and three men stood together a little way from them.

"That was a neat job," one of the men, a tall, dark fellow with a hawk face said. "They never knew what happened. Gents in our business can't afford to have a ranch right in the middle of the section we work, partic'lar if the men who run it are too handy with a rope or a six-gun when they ketch somebody leading a horse, or driving a few cows. We got to get away from here, now."

"Hold on a minute," said a red-haired, bull-necked giant of a man. Let's take a little look." The *morral* lay on the ground at the head of the bed. The man kicked it. "Holy smoke!" he shouted. "Them gents driv a herd to San Antonio and sold it, and this is the money they got for the cows."

"Well," snapped the dark fellow, "you don't have to yell your head off about it. Hang it on your saddlehorn. Then we'll round up the saddle stock and get away from here."

Without his gun, all Button could do was stand helplessly, watching them round up the horses and drive them away. But he photographed an image of each of the men on his brain, particularly a handsome young fellow whose hair was almost white and whose eyes were very blue. He listened until they were out of hearing, then he stole through the thicket to the camp.

The two men, each shot through the head, lay back on their bedding almost as if they were asleep. Button had seen dead men before and often. He had helped lay them out. So he gave no outcry. There was only a tightness in his throat as he straightened the men on their backs, and spread a blanket over them. There was nothing more that he could do. They seemed to have been murdered in their bed while they were asleep.

He would have to have help, he realized, and he knew of but one place to get it. Some of the Y Bar hands who had gone with the herd had stayed behind at San Antonio to have a little fun. But it was a long way to that help, and he was afoot.

Button got the rope from the thicket where he had hidden his saddle, and trudged off up the shore of the big pool. He was "ciphering ahead" again. At the spring, he stopped and stood for some time listening. After awhile he heard horses on the trail.

Hiding behind a clump of bushes he spread his loop and waited. The horses filed by. He selected the biggest one, his rope whirred, and the next moment the animal was plunging on the rope, which was snubbed around a mesquite. The other horses scampered away. The captive pulled on the rope until it choked itself down and fell with a thud.

In a moment Button was on its head, weaving a hackamore. When the animal got its wind back and sprang to its feet, Button was holding a half-hitch around a tree, but the horse didn't try to make a run for it. He pulled on the rope, and the pony took a step forward. He knew then that it was not a wild horse. He could see saddle-scars on its back. It was one that somehow had become mixed with a wild bunch.

A few minutes later, Button rode away from that gruesome camp, headed for the Y Bar. He knew there was no one at the ranch, but he could at least get a real mount there.

CHAPTER II

Manhunter's Disguise

DAWN was coming when he reached the open glade where the ranch cabins stood, but he saw nothing except some piles of ashes. The killers had done a thorough job of breaking up the outfit.

Button stopped and stared, then rode close to the ashes of the house where he had been born and which was the only home he had ever known. As he sat looking down at the ground the coming daylight glistened on something lying there. He swung down and picked it up. It was a woman's earring, one of a pair that had

belonged to his mother.

The only thing about the old ranch cabin that had ever indicated a woman had been there was an old leather trunk that was kept under Button's bed in a corner of the big room. In it were a few keepsakes that had been his mother's, and among them were the two beautiful earrings with garnet sets. One of the killers had rifled the trunk, and in his hurry had dropped one of the treasures.

Button dropped it into a pocket and turned away from the place. Half a mile from the ruins, out on the range, he came upon a band of horses. One of them he had raised from a colt, and had never permitted to be branded. He roped the gentle animal, transferred his saddle to it, and rode on.

Five miles from the ranch, in a thicket so dense few people ever tried to ride through it, Button pulled up at a little shack, and dismounted. A wrinkled old Mexican man came to the door.

"Buenas dias, Amigo," the man shouted. "I thought you would come some time. What is the good news?"

"I have no good news, Manuel," replied Button. "It is all bad. I am tired and hungry. I'm in trouble, and I come to you for help."

"And while I live," said Manuel, gravely, "I will do for you anything that I can. What is the trouble?"

"Stake my horse on the grass, Manuel, and when you come back I will tell you."

Manuel had been a house servant at the ranch as long as the boy's mother lived. After that, with Button gone from home most of the time, there was nothing for him to do, so he had gone to the thickets and lived by hunting and trapping. He was Button's slave. He took the horse and, when he returned, Button told him the whole terrible story.

"They must be buried Manuel," he concluded. "So I have come for you to help me."

The old man had listened intently. He sat silent for a few moments.

"You think much, Senor Button," he said then, "but this time you did not think of one thing."

"What was that?"

"You say Jim and Bob lay on their bed, like they were asleep, and you covered them with a blanket, and that made them look even more like they were sleeping when they were killed. No one was with them but you. I know that you are Bob Yeager's son, and that you would not kill anybody, but few others know it. If the Rangers find you, they will throw you in jail, and you will have no witnesses to prove that you didn't do it."

"But—but we can't leave them lay there," said Button.

"I think we can," said Manuel, in a kindly tone. "It is a much traveled trail. Someone will find them, maybe has already found them, and they will be buried. We could do no more than that. You can do nothing for them now. In the jail, you could not hunt for the men who did kill them. Eat and sleep, Senor Button, while I try to plan further what is to be done."

"I didn't think of that, Manuel. I can see it all now. I do not want to go to jail. I would know the killers anywhere on earth, and I mean to find them."

"Bueno!" said Manuel. "Eat, now, then sleep."

On through the day Button slept, while old Manuel sat in the shade of the shack and studied the problem. Late in the afternoon Manuel woke him.

"I have the plan, Senor," he announced. "It is this: I will make you much older than you are. First, I will cut the hair, then I will shave away the little whiskers that make you look like a little boy. After that we shall see."

Manuel cut the long hair quite short. Then he shaved away the down, and that made him look much older. The shock and grief had drawn the boyish face until lines showed that had never shown before. Manuel looked at him intently.

"Senor Button, you look ten years older," he said. "Now, all you need is to get to a town, buy better clothes, and boots with very high heels, so you look taller, and no one will ever know you. Not many people do know you, and they would not know you now. Take for yourself another name. Get a job on a ranch, and take time to think it all through. Then you can hunt your men. Here is a little gold that I have saved. If you live, you will pay it back. If you do not live, I shall not need gold long."

Button told the old man good-by at nightfall.

"If you hear that a young fellow named Joe White has been killed," he said, "it will be me."

Then he swung to his saddle and rode away.

THE next day Button rode into a sleepy little town far to the north, out of the thickets and well away from the border. There he bought as good clothes as a drifting puncher should wear, including a good hat, and a pair of boots with very high heels.

The added inches of the heels made a startling change in his appearance. With the new lines that trouble had put into his face he looked to be at least twenty-five, while his quiet, almost speechless manner bore out the deception. He had been taught to save everything, so he rolled his old boots and hat tightly in his overalls and put them in his saddle-roll. There was little else in the roll, so it made no great bulk.

The next day he rode into a cow camp. The outfit was making a roundup, and was short-handed. He told the range boss that his name was Joe White and that he wanted a job. He was signed on, with no questions asked.

Joe White didn't hide his saddle in a thicket at night, for the simple reason that he was out in the short grass country, and there were no thickets. But he always slept close to the camp, and in easy reach of his saddle if he should want it quickly.

He had been with the outfit a week, doing his work well and saying nothing about himself, when one evening, late, a cowhand from a ranch farther to the north stopped to spend the night. Button spread his blankets and went to bed, but the range boss and the visitor sat around the campfire smoking.

"Where you been at, Al?" asked the boss.

"Oh, the work was ketched up, and I taken me a little *pasear* down the border a ways. Right smart fun can be had in some of them towns along the border—if a feller likes his fun a little wild."

"What's the news down that way?" the boss prodded.

"Right smart in spots. I was in San Juan one night and seen a real poker game. Three gents was bettin' 'em high with stacks of silver pesos and twenty-dollar gold pieces. They win enough money to buy the county, and then a coupla card sharks sets into the game and win most of it away from 'em."

"Who was they?" asked the boss. "Anybody I know?"

"No, I reckon not. I lost interest in 'em when they began to lose. Looked like they weren't such blaze-roarin' poker players after all. I asked the bartender who they was, and he said cuss if he knowed. Strangers, he said, that blowed into town a coupla weeks ago. They didn't give any names, but one was a tall, hatchet-faced, dark-skinned chap they called Blackie. One of the others was a red-head, and they called him Red. The third one was a handsome, dandified young rooster. His hair was almost white, and they called him Whitey. The barkeep said that was all he knowed about 'em, except that they had a big bundle of kale and spent it free and reg'lar."

Button was not asleep, and he heard every word of it. He was tingling with the news that he had a chance to locate the killers, when the boss drawled:

"That ain't surprisin'. Poker games and big rolls are kept common on the border. Is that all the news you got?"

"Well, no it ain't. I heard something—or rather I read it in a San Antone paper that a drummer left in his chair at the hotel in San Juan. It was all about a twelve year old boy that kilt a coupla gents, stole their money and their horse stock, and hit the trail."

"The devil!" snorted the boss. "No kid like that would ever murder nobody. What else did the paper say? Who was the two fellers that was kilt, and where?"

"Why, you might of knowed Jim and Bob Yeager. They owned the Y Bar ranch down in the thickets."

"Shore I knowed 'em. I used to work in that section. What about 'em?"

"Nothing much. They are tar'ble dead. They are the gents that was murdered. Paper said they had a boy about twelve that was always with 'em. They driv a little bunch of cows into San Antone, sold 'em, and was heading back to the Y Bar. The other hands stayed in town to have a little fun. The Rangers are hunting perdition out for the kid, but they think now he must have got across the Rio Grande with his loot."

"Shore," growled the boss. "Devil of a note when kids like that goes on the kill and rob. Let's go to bed."

Button didn't move. He wanted the men to think he was asleep. He lay awake a long time after that, "ciphering ahead." He couldn't jump the job now, when the outfit was in a tight. It might look suspicious, but he was going on the trail of the killers as soon as he decent-

ly could. Then he called it a day, and went to sleep.

Almost a week later the drive was finished and they went in to headquarters. Then Button told the boss that he reckoned they wouldn't need him any longer. The boss looked at him.

"No," he said, "I don't exactly need you, but I hate to give you up. You are the best hand I've had in a long time. Still and all, if you want to drift, here's your money."

"Thank you, sir," said Button. "I was heading farther west, and just wanted to work a while to get money for some groceries, and to let my horse rest."

BUTTON rode west, but not too far. Well away from the big ranch, he swung back south and headed for the Border. He had been in wild towns. He had even been in saloons and gambling houses. The Yeager brothers went to saloons, and they took the Button with them. They took a drink when they wanted one, and Button always got a soda.

He had even been in San Juan one time, and knew quite well where it was and how to get there.

It was late the following day when Button rode into the wild old border town of San Juan. He took his horse to the livery stable, told the man his name was Joe White, and that he wanted good care taken of his horse. Then he got something to eat, and began a round of the saloons and gambling rooms.

Nowhere could he find any of the men he sought. At last, he thought they might be in a dancehall, and went to the biggest and wildest one in town. He didn't dance, though he knew how, for he had attended many a *baile*. He just hugged the wall and watched the milling throng for the killers.

They were not there, and he was about to quit the place when a very pretty girl came up to him. A glance told him that she was not the common run of dancehall girls. She smiled at him.

"You are not dancing, Senor," she said. "You like to dance, no?"

"Sometimes I like to dance," he said, "but just now I—"

He broke off, and stared at her. The light from a big lamp fell full on her face. She was beautiful, but that was not why he stared. She wore a thin gold chain around her neck and suspended from the chain was the mate to the earring that he had in his pocket! She was wearing it as a lavalier.

"I'd like to dance with you," Button said then.

He slipped his arm around her, and they glided into the mad whirl of dancers.

"That was lovely, Senor," the girl said when the music stopped. "You dance wonderfully. Will we not have something to drink now?"

Along one side of the dancehall was a row of tables where the girls sold the dancers beer at a dollar a bottle. The girl steered Button to one of the tables. They sat down and she ordered the beer. It was poured.

They each took a sip, then set the glasses down. That was all the drinking that was done.

The girl placed her rounded arms on the table and looked across at Button, who was regarding her intently. She thought he was admiring her, but he was merely looking at the jewel at her throat and wondering how he could find out where she got it. By the slender thread of finding out where she got it, and where the man was who gave it to her, hung his chance of locating the killers. He was proceeding with caution, for he did not want that slender thread to break in his hands.

The girl was frankly admiring him, and it showed in her brown eyes when she smiled and leaned forward.

"What is your name, Senor?" she asked.

"Joe White," he replied, without a moment's hesitation.

"Joe," she said, smiling. "In Spanish that would be Jose, like you would say Hosay. But you know that, for you speak Spanish."

"Yes, a little," he said. "I picked it up along the Border, but I do not speak it very well. Not as well as you speak English. I am wondering why a beautiful girl like you, and educated as you are, wearing a splendid jewel like that, would be working in a dancehall."

"I do not work here." She smiled again. "My name is Rosita, and I am the daughter of Cestancio Miguel, who owns this place. I come here sometimes when I am lonesome at home, where I am by myself."

"I see," Button said, thoughtfully. "You do not look like a Spanish girl.

Have you lived here long?"

"I was born here," she replied, "and have lived here all my life, except two years when I was away at school, in a convent. I speak Spanish because I never spoke anything but Spanish until I went away to school. Now I speak English like I am reading it from a book. I really am not all Spanish, only just a little. My father's father was Irish, and his mother was half Spanish. My mother was pure American. So I will let you figure out."

"I have spent most of my life among Spanish-speaking people along the Border," Button said, smiling for the first time. "Now, about that jewel you are wearing."

"Oh, that." She pouted. "I think it is the jewel you admire, more than you do me. I shall be jealous of it and throw it away. It is nothing. One night I came here and a tall, handsome young man danced with me. He was what you would call an albino, except that his eyes were dark, steely blue, and he was very handsome. He said his name was Frank Bartel. He gave me this jewel and said he was going away, but that he would come back to see me. He has not come back. I liked the jewel, so I put it on the chain and am wearing it. It is nothing. If you like it I will give it to you, and if he comes back I will tell him that I lost it."

"No," said Button, slowly. "It is more beautiful at your throat. Keep it there, and perhaps some day I can find you another to match it. Anyway, if you will let me, I'll try."

"You say beautiful things, Senor Joe," she said, "and I love to hear you talk, but I never stay here late. I'll be going home now, and if you like you may walk home with me."

Button liked the idea very much. Not on account of the girl, but because it might be a step on the trail he was following. He was no sucker. He knew that a walk through the dark old town with Rosita had its dangers. She was lovely. She doubtless had many admirers. One of those admirers could hide in a shadow, creep out and stick a knife in his back, and he would be at the end of his quest for the killers of his father and his uncle.

Still he would have to take many desperate chances, if he hoped to find the men he sought.

CHAPTER III

A Trap?

THE *Casa de Miguel* was a rambling old adobe house at the very edge of the town. Beyond it was a deep ravine, and beyond that a grove of trees and thick chaparral.

Button and Rosita entered the patio which was not very large, and sat down on a bench in the light of a moon that was almost full. Button stayed half an hour. The girl did most of the talking. Button was trying to "cipher ahead of him." Finally, he took his leave, promising to come again.

Button had walked a hundred yards when he suddenly went to his toes, and made no more noise than a snake crawling. Then he heard someone following him. The thought came to him that Rosita had led him into a trap, and he had left her house before she could close it, for she had insisted that he stay longer.

When he came to the end of the street he did not take the sidewalk, but followed down the middle of the street in the shadows of the buildings. Several times he heard a board creak in the sidewalk across to his left, and he grinned. Whoever was following him was not a very smart trailer.

He heard the creaking just as he turned into the hotel where he had taken a room for the night. There he promptly called it a day and went to bed. He lay a little while trying to "cipher ahead," but gave it up. He was on the trail now, and it was a dangerous one. He would need his eyes open when he walked the streets from here on.

Next morning Button took up his job again. He went from one saloon and gambling room to another. He saw very few people and the ones he did see were sleepy-eyed. San Juan lived mostly at night and slept in the daytime.

It was almost noon when he passed in front of an old adobe church. An old beggar woman sat on the step, with a mantilla drawn close about her wrinkled face. She was peddling sweets, and

whined her wares as he approached her.

He was about to pass when she said in a hoarse whisper:

"*Cuidado, Senor!* Beware. Take the *azucar.* It is for you. Do not unwrap it here."

She slipped a small piece of the confection, wrapped in a sort of matting, into his hand. He dropped it into a pocket, gave her a coin, and passed on.

Back in his room at the hotel he unwrapped the little roll of crude sugar and in it found a closely folded note. He opened it and read:

Senor Joe:

You are in great danger. The man, Frank Bartel, came back. He saw you leave here last night, and he is very jealous. He swears he will kill you.

I care nothing for Bartel, but I like you. I do not want you to go away without seeing you again, but you must go when it is dark tonight. Come to me at dusk, for a little while. I will be waiting in the patio.

Rosita

Button read the note with a deep frown. He had escaped Frank Bartel the night before, if that really was his name, which was not likely, and now another trap was being set for him. For a long time he "ciphered" the thing.

Rosita didn't look like a crook, but one never could tell. A crook who looked like a crook would have very little luck in his game. At long last he decided that he would walk into the trap.

Late in the afternoon he saddled his horse, rode by the *Casa de Miguel,* and on out of town. He saw Rosita wave at him from a barred window, but refused to notice it. At dusk he dismounted in the grove of trees across the ravine from the back of her house, left his horse and stole across to the dwelling.

Rosita was waiting in the patio, as she had said she would be, though she had lost hope that he would come, after seeing him ride out of town. She gave a little smothered cry as Button stepped into the patio.

"It is good to see you, Senor Joe, and tell you good-by," she said in an excited tone. "But you must not stay. Frank Bartel is coming here tonight, and he will kill you if he finds you. He is terribly jealous and angry. I like you, because you are different from any man I ever knew."

"That's fine," said Button, "and it makes me in no hurry to go. You say this Frank Bartel is the man who gave you the jewel?"

"Yes, but it means nothing to me now. I hate him, and will send him away. You must come back to me when he is out of town, but now you must leave at once."

"Maybe," said Button. "What makes you think—"

"Listen!" she hissed. "He is coming. I hear him on the walk. You cannot get away. Quick! Come with me."

She caught his hand, led him to a door, opened it and pushed him through.

"Follow this passage," she said, "and you will find a door at the other end. Open it, and you will be outside the house."

She closed the door and ran back into the patio just as Frank Bartel entered it.

BUTTON had a real job of "ciphering" to do now. He didn't know where that passage led. There might be an outside door at the other end of it. There also might be some gentleman crouched there in the darkness to stick a knife into him when he tried to open the door.

There was another very good reason why Button was not going to follow the passage just then. He wanted to make sure that this Frank Bartel was one of the killers. There was more than one light-haired, handsome man in the world. This gent might have bought the jewel from the killer they called Whitey in perfectly good faith, then given it to the girl. So Button cautiously opened the door a crack.

He was just in time to see Frank Bartel step into the patio. Rosita greeted him, not too cordially.

"Where is the maverick?" the man snapped at her.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh yes you do," he snarled. "He was here last night, and he came again tonight. I saw him come in, and he has not left. Where is he? I told you I'd kill him if you let him come here again."

"You have no right to tell me who can come to see me," she said with spirit. "You do not own me. I'm through with you. Here is your jewel. Take it, and get out of the house. I hate you."

She put her hands up to unclasp the necklace, and he caught both her wrists.

"Stop it, you little fool," he said. "Have you gone clean crazy over this drifter in one day? Tell me where he

is, and he won't bother you again."

Rosita didn't scream for help, but she fought as best she could by kicking his shins and trying to bite his hands. They struggled back and forth about the patio.

The man's face was in shadow at first, and Button couldn't identify him. Then the man lost his hat, and the moonlight fell full on his face. A moment later something else fell on his head. It was the barrel and cylinder of Button's rusty old .45. Bartel went down, and lay very still.

"Oh, Senor Joe," cried Rosita. "You have killed him in my house and it will get me into bad trouble."

"No, it won't," said Button, calmly, as he deftly bound and gagged the man. "I am going to take him away. He is not dead. Help me carry him outside."

They got the man out under the trees. Button looked about and found Bartel's horse tethered there. They got the man into the saddle, and Button tied his hands to the saddlehorn. Bartel came out of his trance then and stiffened. Button turned to the girl.

"Mr. Bartel won't be back," he said, "but I'll come back some time—maybe."

That was all. He led Bartel's horse across the ravine to where he had left his own horse. Mounting it, he led the way out of town, with Bartel's bridle in his hand.

He skirted the town, then set a course by the stars and plunged into the wild, open cactus country, where few men could have traveled.

IT WAS coming daylight when Button pulled up at old Manuel's shack in the thickets next morning. Button had taken no chances. Bartel had ridden all night with a gag in his mouth, and Button had said no word to him.

When Button and Manuel walked the captive to a seat in the shack, Bartel was shaky. The gag was removed, and he took a long breath, then broke out cursing Button for everything he could lay his tongue to.

"Shut up!" barked Button. "If you don't stop that noise I'm going to kill you before I'm ready. Where are Blackie and Red?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Bartel. I never knew anybody named Blacky and Red."

"No?" said Button. "I'll tell you about them. I saw you and two other men murder Jim and Bob Yeager. One of the others is called Blackie and the third is called Red. I was within fifty feet of you after the murder was done. I had no gun and could do nothing but watch you. There was good light from the campfire and I would know any of you, anywhere. I saw Red kick the *morral* that had the money in it, and let out a yell. I heard Blackie tell him not to yell his head off, but to hang the *morral* on the saddlehorn, and help round up the horses.

"I saw all of you bunch the horses and drive them south into the thickets. Not only that, I know that the three of you burned the Y Bar ranch cabin, and that you, yourself, robbed it. You stole some things out of a trunk, and as you left you dropped this." Button took the earring from his pocket and held it up. "There were two of these. You know what you did with the other one."

"Blast that girl!" roared Bartel. "I'll kill—"

"No, you won't," said Button. "You won't ever kill anybody again."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you was trying to kill me when I took you, and if I turn you loose, you'll try again. So I'll make you a proposition. I need you alive for a while, but if you don't tell me where I can find Red and Blackie, I am going to put a bullet through your head right now. I'm in a hurry."

Button slid his gun from the holster.

"Hold it," yelled Bartel. "I'll talk. You are the coldest thing I ever met up with. I was a fool, and I have to pay. After we burned the ranch and killed the two men we went to San Juan and rolled 'em pretty high for a week or two. Then Rangers began to swarm into town. They gave it out that they were hunting for a kid about twelve years old, but we didn't like the lay of things, and beat it for our hideout. While we were living high in San Juan I fell pretty hard for Rosita Miguel. One day I told Red and Blackie that I just had to go to town and see her. They cursed me for a moonstruck fool, but I went. I got to tell you one thing. I didn't kill ary one of them Yeager gents. Red killed one and Blackie the other."

"Maybe you are telling the truth and maybe not," said Button, "but you had better tell it straight from here on. Tell me where I can find Red and Blackie. If

you give me the wrong directions, I'll find it out and I'll come back here and kill you. If you tell the truth, I'll turn you over to the Rangers and let you take your chance in court."

A little flash of hope came into Bartel's blue eyes. If Button found Red and Blackie, they would kill him, and that would leave no one to accuse him.

"All right," he said, "I'll tell it straight. You ride northeast out of San Juan on a main trail. Ten mile from town you come to a deep *resaca.* Quit the trail and turn down the bed of the *resaca.* When you have gone a mile you will see a dim trail leading up out of the ravine to the south. Follow it a quarter of a mile and you will be at the shack. I left them there. They may not be there now, but if they are, God have pity on you. They won't."

"All right," said Button. "You'll be here when I get back. If you have lied to me, I'll kill you. If you haven't, I'll keep my word and turn you over to the Rangers." Then Button turned to Manuel. "Keep him safe, Manuel, until I get back. Feed him, let him sleep, but if he raises a yell, or tries to escape, kill him."

The next moment Button was on his horse and gone.

Far out in the thickets, he lariated his horse and lay down to sleep. It was late afternoon when he woke, mounted his horse and set out for San Juan. Beating steadily on through the thickets, he had plenty of time to "cipher things out". It was just his hard luck that he couldn't go to the Rangers and tell them what he knew, without taking the risk of running his own neck into a noose. But if he went to the Rangers now and asked them to help him take Red and Blackie, they would simply grab him and throw him in jail. So there was nothing to be done but try to take the two killers by himself.

Button had never killed a man, but since the night of the murder he had thought it would be no great wrong to kill the murderers anywhere he found them. He had not killed Frank Bartel, but it was only because he wanted to use him. He knew that if he could fix the guilt on Bartel, the man would be hanged.

Taking two tough killers by himself promised to be quite a chore, Button knew, but it had to be done—not only to punish them, but to save his own neck. If he found them, he would be no match for them in a gunfight. He would have to do the job with his head. So he went on "ciphering" as he rode.

CHAPTER IV

Button Crowds His Luck

AS HE rode on into the night there was no thought in Button's mind that he might be crowding his luck too far. It was almost daylight when he pulled up in the big thicket across the draw from the *Casa de Miguel.* He needed help. Rosita had helped him take Frank Bartel. Perhaps she would help him again.

He was not going to ask a lot of her. He was hungry, and fighting Red and Blackie on an empty stomach, if he should find them, was a little too much. So he crossed the ravine and walked noiselessly into the patio of the old house. Perhaps she would supply him with food.

He had kept his eyes open the two times that he had been there, and he was pretty sure he had located Rosita's room. Old Cestancio Miguel had not been too long in bed, after tending his saloon and gambling room as long as there was a penny to be made, but he would sleep until noon. So Button tapped lightly with the ends of his fingers on what he figured to be her door.

He heard someone stirring about in the room, and tapped again. There followed a long silence. He was about to tap a third time when the door opened a crack.

"Who is there?" a voice whispered.

"Joe," was the reply, in a low tone.

"Why are you here?" she asked him, terror in her voice. "You will be killed."

"I came to ask a favor of you," Button said calmly. "The Rangers are after me, and I dare not go into the town to get food. I need two things. Food and a new quirt. My horse is worn out, and I must urge him all I can. Get a long, heavy quirt, and if there is iron in the handle it will be better. Will you bring those things to me at the thicket on the other side of the ravine?"

"It is dangerous, Senor Joe, but I—I

would do anything that I could for you. I'll try."

Button stole back to the thicket and waited, but not for long. He heard a light step, and the next moment Rosita was with him. He took the package of food, and began eating.

"I had no trouble," she whispered. "I knew I could get the food from the kitchen. Then I remembered that Pedro Sanchez, the old crippled quirt-maker, had left a bundle of quirts to keep them from being stolen while he is away. So I took the biggest one, and I hope it will do."

Button finished eating, then picked up the quirt. He slipped its loop-handle over his right hand, and ran the long whip through his left, as if measuring its length. The handle was very heavy and the long, forked tail was made of two thongs cut from thick, hard leather with the edges left square and sharp.

"This will do all right," he told her, "and now I have to ride before it gets too light. I'll come back and thank you for all this—maybe."

"Senor Joe, you are in great danger," said the girl. "I may never see you again. I did this for you because I love you. Kiss me before you go."

It was not very neatly done, and Button didn't put too much into it, for he had never before kissed a girl, but he kissed her, then swung to his saddle and was gone. He was "ciphering ahead" again, but not about girls and kisses.

A mile from the trysting place he stopped in another thicket, dismounted and let his horse drag its bridle and graze while he did a strange thing. Untying his saddle-roll he shook out the battered old hat, worn boots and tattered garments he had stowed there. He changed into them and, rolling his better things in the slicker, put them in the forks of a little mesquite. The down on his face had grown out, and he rubbed a little dirt on it, which accentuated it. He shortened his stirrups a little, which he had been riding longer to make him look tall.

When he rode out of that thicket he was the same Billiken-faced kid who had eaten dust behind Jim and Bob Yeager just before they were killed.

Button knew it was safer to keep to the thickets, but he was in a hurry and the going would be slow in the dense chaparral. So he bore to his left, and when he struck the trail he looked along it in both directions. Seeing no one, he turned northeast, using his new quirt. His horse was tired, but it was still good for ten miles or so. That was when Button began to crowd his luck, and didn't know it.

IT WAS some time after sunrise when Button came to the mesquite draw, and turned down its bed. A mile farther on he found the dim trail leading up out of the draw, just as Frank Bartel had said he would.

He rode up the bank, cautiously, and reined into a thicket. This was as far as he meant to ride. The rest of the job would be done on foot. Making his horse fast, he removed his gun and spurs, and hung them on his saddlehorn, but he left the new quirt dangling from his wrist. He set forward through the thickets, stopping from time to time to listen. At last, through an opening, he saw the shack. It was just a one-room cabin, thatched with grass, with neither door nor window in the side facing him.

Stopping from time to time behind a clump of brush to listen, Button crept toward the cabin, making no whisper of sound. He gained the wall of the cabin, and crouched close against it. He could hear growling voices inside, and he had a feeling that he creeping up on a rattlesnake. Two men were talking, and he recognized the voice of Blackie, who had done most of the talking at the scene of the murder.

"Cuss that Frank Bartel, anyway," Blackie was saying. "Bartel ain't the right kind to trail with us. We taken him on because he could put up a good front, but he's butter-fingered in a showdown. He didn't fire a shot when we kilt them two fellers, but he taken his split out of what we got. Now he's gone crazy over a woman. If he's dead, it's all right with me. But I'm afraid he ain't dead, and if the Rangers pick him up he'll squeal like a pig. Said he'd be gone one night, and he's been gone three days. We've got to hunt him up, and us riding into San Juan, with Rangers all over the place, ain't my idee of fun."

"Tarnation, Blackie," said Red. "Lay off'n Frank. He's all right. He ain't the first man to go loco over a pretty girl. We have all did it one time or another. Look what a devil of a mess Samson got into when he tied up with Delilah. But if we are going to look for Frank, we

better clean and oil our guns, so if the Rangers jump us we can make a little smoke."

The talking stopped. Button could hear them jack the cartridges out of their guns, and drop them on the table. Then he heard the cylinders thud as they laid them down. Sliding around a corner of the cabin, he still found no door. He turned the next corner, and there was the door. It was open and two men were sitting at a narrow table, with guns and wiping rags between them.

Red's back was to the door, Blackie was facing it, but he was looking down at the gun he was cleaning. Red, the more alert of the two, jerked his head around and saw Button standing in the door.

"Hey, what the—" he yelled.

"Hi'yer, gents," greeted Button, in the best pear-thicket drawl. "Y'all saw any stray horse stock around here? Two of ourn just skint their bellies and run plumb off—lessen somebody taken 'em off. A blue roan and a sorrel they was. Say, you ain't saw 'em?"

"No," roared Blackie, who had recovered from his surprise, "we ain't. What the devil you mean creepin' up on a house thisaway?"

"I didn't creep up on nothin'," declared Button. "I just seen a shack, and come to the door to ast about my horse stock. I thought maybe you had saw 'em. Them's shore good guns you got. Wisht I had me a gun of some sort to use if I find somebody draggin' them two broncs."

The floor of the shack was dirt, and Button had gradually eased in on it until he stood just a little back of Red.

"Them guns looks like new," he went on. "Are they any notches on the handles?" He was standing awkwardly, drawing the long quirt through his left hand.

Red looked up at him.

"Yes, they's notches on 'em," he snarled. "And if you don't get the devil away from here they'll be another one."

The two killers feared nothing from this green, pear-thicket boy, who, in his ragged clothes and run-down boots, plainly was just an ignorant bush-horner. Red turned his eyes back to the gun he was cleaning.

There was a swishing noise, and the long, hard, forked tail of that quirt fell square across his eyes, cutting like a knife and completely blinding him.

WITH a snarl of rage, Blackie kicked his chair out of the way and sprang for Button. But with a lightning movement the boy now had the tail of the quirt in his right hand. Blackie came on, holding his hands low. He had almost reached Button when the loaded handle of the quirt caught him across the temple, and he went down in a heap. Red was roaring with pain, and groping for something to fight with, when the handle of the quirt reached his head and he, too, went down.

It was all over in a twinkling, and only the very audacity of the thing had made it succeed.

From somewhere in his rags, Button produced a supply of heavy cord and bound the men so they couldn't possibly get away. Then he took a half-hitch on Blackie's feet with the man's own rope, pulled him around to the wall, and made the rope fast to one of the logs of the cabin. After that, he did the same kindly service for Red.

The men would be unable to touch one another, and there was no chance that they would get their hands to the knots in their bonds.

Satisfied with his work, Button stood up and looked about the cabin. There on the wall, hanging on a peg, was the old Y Bar *morral*, in which Jim and Bob Yeager had carried their money.

Button had no intention of trying to get the killers into San Juan. He would just leave them here, and get word to the Rangers of their whereabouts. He had turned toward the door when Blackie came out of his trance.

"What the devil do you mean pulling a stunt like this?" he yelled.

"I mean for you two gents to stay here a while," said Button. "I didn't gag you, because it sorta interferes with a feller's wind, but if I was you, I wouldn't yell too loud. They's right smart Rangers prowling these thickets right now."

He turned and stepped out the door, while Blackie blistered him with curses.

Button rode back up the ravine to the main trail, then turned toward San Juan. He was in a hurry now to get back to where he had left his saddle-roll, and to change back into the garments of Joe White. But he was still just a kid. He had steeled himself to the dangerous job that he had done, and now that it was over, all the gimp went out of him. He had had very little sleep in the last forty-

eight hours and, with the sun bearing down hard, it was beginning to catch up with him.

He rode a mile or so and then gave it up. He didn't want to ride into trouble in the condition he was in. So he turned out into the thickets, and after going half a mile lariated his horse in a little glade. There, in the shade of a rock, he literally fell down and went to sleep.

Button didn't know how long he had slept when he woke with a start and sat up on the ground. Three men sat their horses near by, looking down at him. One of them he knew was Anton Perales, Y Bar *vaquero* who had stayed behind in San Antonio on that fatal cattle drive. Button gave no sign of recognition, but Anton spoke.

"That is heem, Senores," he said. "I know him well. He is the *muchacho,* what you call the button, that was always with the Senores Yeager, to wait on them. They kept him in the house. He was with them when they leave San Antone, to go back to the Y Bar."

"Well," snapped one of the Rangers, boring into Button with cold, hard eyes, "what have you got to say?"

"Nothing," replied Button. He had not "ciphered" this thing out yet, and he didn't mean to talk too much.

"Oh, you don't mean to talk! You admit that you are the Yeager boy's button, don't you?"

"Yes," said Button. "What of it?"

"Nothing much," said the Ranger with a wintry smile, "except that you murdered Jim and Bob Yeager in their bed, stole their money and their horses, and beat it out of the country. But you didn't go far enough. Now you are going to jail, from there to a courthouse, and from there to a necktie party. Come on, and don't try any fancy gunplay. It ain't healthy."

Button rose to his feet, unbuckled his belt, and handed belt, holster and gun to the Ranger.

"That's better," the Ranger growled. "Saddle his horse, Anton."

Thus it happened that Button got a room with bed and meals at the old adobe San Juan jail soon after noon that day. There he stretched out on his cot and went to sleep.

He was awakened by someone talking. The jailer was a handsome, dark man, with a pair of sly brown eyes, but there was no hint that he could be bought, even if Button had anything to buy him with. His name was Ramon Mendez, and he was something of a lady's man. The Ranger Captain was speaking at the moment.

"Ramon," he was saying, "it has been a lot of trouble to take that kid. He is a smooth one. Don't let him work you, and get away. He ain't very big, but he is plenty bad."

"Have no fear, Senor," said Ramon. "I have kept many in this jail, and not one has got away from me yet. He will be here when you come to hang him."

CHAPTER V

Tip-Off

LATER, Ramon brought Button's supper. Button made a good meal of it. The jailer came back, brought an *olla* of fresh water, and took away the dishes. When the man was gone, Button rolled a smoke and sat down on his cot.

He had caught up with his sleep, and was now very wide awake. It was growing dusk, and only a faint light came in at the tiny barred window. Button tried to "cipher" a little, but making plans was not worth much to a man who was in jail, and could not put his plans into effect.

He thought of Red and Blackie, tied up out there in that shack. He could have told the Rangers about them, but more than likely they would not have believed him. It was coming to Red and Blackie, but it would be pretty tough for them to lie there and starve to death. He would tell the Rangers in the morning.

Button tried to see out the window then, but it had grown too dark, so he went back and sat down on the cot. It came to him that he might dig a hole through the jail's adobe wall before morning if he had a good knife, but where was he to get one? He didn't like being in jail, but he saw no way to get out of his cell except through the door, and with a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. He knew, now that it was too late, that he had crowded his luck too far.

He smoked on, but didn't get sleepy. It was almost midnight when a key turned slowly in the lock on the door of his cell. The door opened a little.

"Do not speak," a voice whispered. "Come with me and make no noise."

He followed instructions and stepped outside the cell door. It was inky dark. He heard the door close, and the key turn. Then a hand took his, and led him cautiously toward the jailer's office at the end of the corridor. There his guide stopped for a moment. The only sound Button heard was the clink of keys being put back on the nail beside the door, where they were always kept, and a soft, wheezy snore that came from somewhere in the big room. They passed out the front door then, and walked silently away.

Button knew by the small soft hand that led him, that his guide was Rosita. No word was spoken until they were in the grove across the ravine from the *Casa de Miguel.*

"How did you do it, Rosita?" Button asked.

"It—it was hard for me," she faltered. "I do not believe that you are bad, but if you are, it would make no difference to me. I love you. For a long time Ramon Mendez has wanted to pay attention to me, and I would have nothing to do with him. Tonight I went to the jail, and took a bottle of *mescal* with me. There may have been something in it, I don't know. Ramon drank some of it, and went to sleep. He could make for me bad trouble, but I don't think he can afford to talk."

"How did you know I was in jail?" asked Button.

"I was in the town, and near the jail when they brought you in. You wore rags, and though that might fool some people, I would know you anywhere. But we should not stand talking here. You must be far from here by morning, and you have no horse."

"Yes," said Button. "I've got to drift. But first I want to know what you did with the jewel that Frank Bartel gave you."

"I put it away, to give back to him if he comes here again."

"He won't come again. So keep the jewel as a remembrance from me. Some day I will bring you the mate for it."

Rosita didn't have to ask him to kiss her this time. He took her in his arms, kissed her, and then disappeared into the chaparral.

Button didn't drift too far. He went only a mile to where he had left his better clothes and high-heeled boots. In San Juan, the barbershop opened early, and the sleepy barber had a customer as soon as he was ready for business. It was Button, again masquerading as Joe White, and again seeking a short haircut and shave.

BUTTON had told the livery man that his name was Joe White, so when he called for his horse the man gave it to him without question, and Button rode quietly out of town and back to the thicket where he had met Rosita. But the girl was not there.

He sat for a moment thinking things over. It would soon be twenty-four hours since Red and Blackie had food or water. They were criminals of the worst sort, but even so it was cruelty. There was only one thing to do about it. Leaving his horse tied in the thicket, he set off for Rosita's house. He knew Cestancio Miguel would still be asleep.

Rosita was astonished.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. "Do you not know that the Rangers will kill you if they see you again?"

"I want to write a letter to the sheriff," Button said, calmly, "and I want you to mail it at once."

She gave him paper and pencil and he wrote:

Mister Sheriff:
You can tell the Rangers that two of the men who murdered the Yeager brothers are tied up in an old shack on the other side of Mesquite Draw, a mile below the main trail. Better go get them. They are apt to get dry.
The Button

Button gave the letter to the girl and told her to meet him in the grove after dark that night. Then he left the house.

Far out in the heart of a great thicket he spent the day. But the sheriff and the Rangers did not spend the day so quietly. When Rosita met Button at the trysting place that night, she told him what had happened.

Ramon Mendez had not come to breakfast that morning, and the sheriff had gone to see what was wrong. Ramon was sitting in a chair staring at the keys on the wall.

"What's the matter, Ramon?" asked

the sheriff. "Why don't you come to breakfast?"

"I do not want any breakfast, Senor," said Ramon. "Something strange has happened. I did not leave this room all night, but a little while ago I took the keys and went to the cell of the one you call the Button. I called, and he did not answer me. I opened the door and went in, and, Senor—he was not there! He must be *el Diablo*. He was not there, I tell you, and I do not understand."

Ramon crossed himself devoutly, to drive the evil spirits away.

"You don't understand, eh?" sneered the sheriff. "I do. You unlocked the door in your sleep, and when you awoke, he was gone, and you had a few pesos in your hand and the promise of more."

"No, no, no," protested Ramon. "I did not let him out. I swear it on the cross."

"Oh, all right," said the sheriff. "I can look into it later. He hasn't gone far. I'll tell the Rangers and they can pick him up again."

The sheriff set out to find the Rangers. He passed the postoffice, and then it was that he got Button's letter. He showed the letter to the Ranger captain.

"What a jail you got," the Ranger complained. "A prisoner can sweat through the walls in the night time. He's a nervy little devil to write us a letter like that. His story about the two men in the shack is just to throw us off, but we can take a look. The Button hangs out in those thickets where we found him, and we'll go there again. I want him worse than ever now, and when I get him this time he won't get away."

Rosita had kept a pretty close watch on the jail, and she told Button that shortly after noon the Rangers had brought in two men and put them in jail. She said the men were in pretty bad shape. A doctor went to the jail, and said one of the men was just about blind from the blow of a whip across his eyes. The men had told a wild story about a gang coming to their shack and overpowering them. When questioned, Blackie admitted that a tough-looking kid had been with them.

Two days passed. Button spent them in the thickets, coming to the trysting place at night, and again just before daylight, to eat the food Rosita brought him. On the third morning she was all excited.

"Senor Joe," she said, "I will be afraid to come here again. I am afraid that Ramon will talk, and they will watch me. Then, too, I heard that they are going to turn the two men loose. You will be in terrible danger then. Please leave the country until this thing blows over."

"All right," said Button, and swinging to his saddle he rode back into the thickets.

IT WAS about nine o'clock that morning when the Rangers went to the jail. The sheriff had taken no chances on Red and Blackie getting away, and had been on guard himself. The Rangers told him that they had no warrant for the two men, and nothing to hold them for. They had come to turn them loose.

They were just about to enter the jail and carry the good news to the killers when a slender young puncher, wearing no gun, approached them.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he greeted. "I understand that you are about to turn Red and Blackie loose."

"Who are you?" barked the Ranger captain. "You look right smart like the Button to me, only you are a few inches taller, and maybe five years older. Are you his brother?"

"No," replied Button. "Listen, gentlemen. I want to tell you something, and then you can arrest me if you want to. I'm tired of the thickets. Red and Blackie, and a man named Frank Bartel, murdered Jim and Bob Yeager. You have Red and Blackie in jail, and I can deliver Bartel to you any time you want him."

"Huh!" grunted the Ranger. "How do you know all this?"

"Because I saw them do it," Button replied, calmly. "If you looked around any in that shack where you found Red and Blackie, you saw an old *morral* with a Y Bar brand on it, hanging on the wall. I saw the *morral* when I tied the two killers up. That *morral* was the poke in which Jim and Bob carried their money."

"You—you tied Red and Blackie up? Don't try to get funny. No stripling like you tied them two gents up. Who are you, anyway?"

"The Button," he said, quietly.

They looked at him in astonishment as he calmly told them the whole story, including Frank Bartel's confession that

he had been with Red and Blackie when the murder was committed, but that he had fired no shot. Button related how he had been on Red and Blackie's trail all the time, and that he was on the way to tell the officers about capturing the men when he had been picked up and thrown in jail.

"Why didn't you report all that about the Yeager brothers' murder at once to the Rangers?" asked the captain.

"Because it looked like I had killed them, and I was afraid I would be thrown in jail before I could locate the real killers."

"You would have been. We thought we had a cinched case against you. What are you to the Yeagers?"

"Bob Yeager was my father, and Jim my uncle."

"Can you prove all that?" asked the Ranger.

"Easily," replied Button.

"All right. Now tell us how you got out of jail."

"That," smiled Button, "is my private business, and I have nothing to say about it except that no one should blame Ramon for it. He didn't let me out. I had some things to do, and I just got out."

"Glad you did," chuckled the Ranger. "You have saved us a lot of trouble, if you are telling a straight story. And we'll soon find out if you are. We'll get the horses and head out of here with Red and Blackie. We won't handcuff you, but we'll take you along just in case you can't clear up this mess like you say you can."

Very late that night they reached Manuel's shack in the thickets. Frank Bartel was there, safely bound. He had been quite hopeful since Button had been gone so long, but when Red and Blackie stumbled into the shack with manacles on their wrists, his mouth fell open and he stared at them.

Manuel soon satisfied the Rangers as to Button's identity, and with the confession that Bartel had made the matter was closed. Red and Blackie had sulked, but when the confession came out, and Bartel's statement that he had fired no shot, Blackie cursed him.

"I told you he was a dirty welcher," he said to Red. "I wish I had a hand loose, and a gun in it."

Next morning, when they had the prisoners all mounted, and ready to head out for a distant jail, the captain said:

"I reckon you gents are a pretty smooth gang of killers, but this is one time that you overlooked the Button."

Then he shook hands with Button, wished him luck, and told him that if he ever wanted a job with the Rangers, he would see that he got it.

One evening a week later Button again stepped into the patio of the *Casa de Miguel*. Rosita greeted him with a little cry of joy, and asked if he was still in danger.

"No," he told her, "that is all settled. I just came by to put some things right. I told you I would bring the other jewel. Here it is. They are a pair of earrings that my mother once wore. The one you have is what led me to the trail of the killers. Take them, and wear them always."

"But, Senor Joe, do you not want to keep them, on account of your mother?"

"Yes," said Button, "but don't call me Joe. That is just a name I used for a while. My name is Leonard Yeager. Here is how I want to keep the jewels. I'm still just a button, but I'll grow some. I have some land and some cows, and I can build another house. When I do, I want the jewels, and you with them. How about it, Rosita?"

"I'm yours already," she told him, as she went to his arms. "But please let me call you Joe. It is the name that I loved the first time I saw you."

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE NESTER

A Novelet of the Cattle Country

By BARRY SCOBEE

As Stanton dived forward to the ground, the sheriff fired again, and Red spilled down the steps

TENDERFOOT TROUBLE

By MEL PITZER

Old Sheriff Boyd Cooper of Dry Wells learns a trick or two about fast drawing from a gabby traveling salesman!

THE arrival of the stage in Dry Wells was an event that never seemed to lose its excitement. Each time people gathered to watch it rocking in.

This afternoon was no exception and quite a crowd awaited its arrival. As usual, on the porch of his office and jail, Sheriff Boyd Cooper was in his accustomed place, sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall. His tanned-leather features were a contrast to his silver-white hair and white walrus mustache that hung down alongside of his wide, whimsical mouth. Boyd was prematurely gray, and with his youthful, long-stepping stride and bright snapping gray eyes, he had a somewhat odd old-young appearance.

A barrel-chested man, with gleaming curly black hair, worn long behind his ears, black straight brows, and agate eyes that seemed slitted because they were continually squinting over the

smoke of a cigarette, came pushing through the gathering and headed toward the sheriff. Cooper, noticing the fellow, became tense, while his hand drifted closer to the shiny butt of the Colt upon his right hip.

The townsmen knew there was no love lost between "Curly" Stanton and the sheriff. Stanton had come to Dry Wells almost a year before and opened a big dance and gambling hall. Immediately it had become a success, because entertainment was something the people enjoyed. That enjoyment soured when Stanton began to get tough and crooked.

Curly Stanton stopped beside the sheriff.

"I come to get Red Jackson out of the hoosegow, Cooper," he said.

The lawman let the front legs of his chair thump to the porch, as he stood up.

"I'll get him for yuh," he said curtly, and entered the jail.

A few minutes later Cooper returned with a big red-headed, red-faced fellow. He had a crooked nose, a crooked jaw and a sullen look.

"Listen here," barked the freed prisoner, "the next time yuh stick a gun in my ribs, Sheriff, and lock me up for bein' drunk and disorderly, just because I beat up a skunk who says the Good Luck runs crooked games, there'll be a different endin', mebbe. I ain't goin' to take no more from you."

The sheriff flayed "Red" Jackson with a cold glance and thrust out his jaw.

"It's the fourth time yuh beat up somebody when yuh was fightin' drunk and lookin' for trouble," he retorted. "You or nobody else is goin' to start anything in my town. Besides, Hastings is a cripple with a game leg and what he said was done in a joshin' way, like any man losin' would say it when the game and the dealer is against him. He said it smilin'. Yuh got no right gun-whippin' a gent 'cause he opens his mouth. Now get movin', Red."

JACKSON, about to make a reply, was pushed on his way by Stanton, who faced the sheriff again.

"Cooper," he said, "Yuh been against me ever since I opened the Good Luck. Yuh've took every chance yuh could find to sock one of my men in jail for one thing or another. Yuh had a law made to close me at four in the mornin', then two o'clock, then midnight. Now I'm gettin' sick and tired of yuh buttin' into my business, and I want yuh to keep away from the Good Luck from now on. Yuh might be the Law around here, but yuh're roddin' it too close with me. I'll make it a personal matter between us if yuh don't lay off."

As Sheriff Cooper listened he felt a rush of hot blood suffuse his face.

"You listen to me, Stanton!" he said, trying to hide the anger in his voice. "I don't care whether yuh open up ten Good Luck pleasure places in this town. I don't care whether yuh run 'em wide open night and day. But there's been complaints comin' in about the noise and about the gents that come home rolled clean, havin' been jumped on in some dark place after they made a winnin' and left. There's kids standin' with one foot on the bar-rail who ought to be drinkin' milk. I could go on for another hour and tell yuh what I been hearin', and as long as yuh're gettin' tough about it, I'll show yuh somethin' right here."

From inside his shirt, the sheriff brought out a folded paper and opened it. A long list of names could be seen on it.

"This here," he informed, "is a petition given to the Citizens' Committee and signed by seventy-five per cent of the people. They want yuh closed up all week 'ceptin' Friday and Saturday. I been talkin' 'em out of it, Stanton, 'cause it'll make more trouble than goes on now. In two nights the boys will try to pack enough red-eye into theirselves to last 'em the rest of the week. But seein' yuh're on the prod, I'm servin' warnin' now. Today is Friday. Startin' Monday, yuh close yore place for a week. I'll be down with the papers and the notice to put on the door closin' yuh up."

A nasty smile was curling Stanton's lips, as he shot back, venomously:

"Why, yuh cussed old has-been! You come down Monday to close my place and I'll fill yuh full of lead. Get that? I'll turn yuh into a sieve!"

Abruptly he swung around and started off.

"Mebbe yuh'd better meet me at noon Monday out in front of yore place, Stanton, and I'll not only close yore place up permanent, but you, too!" the sheriff called after him.

The Good Luck owner flung a rasping laugh at the lawman.

"That's just what I want," he bit out savagely. "And yuh got witnesses here to swear, when yuh're put in a pine box, that yuh asked for yore due!"

Laughing again, Stanton strode on.

Sheriff Cooper realized that he had taken a long and dangerous step, one he might not be able to retrace. Perhaps he should have used a little more tact. But the man irritated him, and more than once a remark came to Cooper's ears that Stanton had referred to him as a "has-been" and that the wool could easily be pulled over his eyes.

Cooper had listened to these rumors, but said nothing. But now he had asked for a settlement of everything, in the way men usually settled arguments once and for all. Not with the sort of law that his badge stood for, but with that which smoking guns dealt out.

A sudden sensation of panic swept through the sheriff. Of what had he been thinking when he challenged Curly Stanton to a gun duel? Why, Stanton was a practised gunman! At different times he gave marvelous exhibitions of his gun dexterity to amuse the onlookers, and his draw was a smooth, effortless movement, like the quick striking of lightning!

Cooper, never a gunman, was only mediocre in getting out his hogleg. Well, he had talked himself into a pine box before witnesses and after his demise the power of Stanton would grow, for people turn from one sort of hero worship to another with an equal relish, and already among the men of the town Stanton was looked up to in a way. It was a country where gun magic was worshiped, even as a great actor or actress is by the theater-going crowd.

A couple of bystanders came over to the sheriff.

"Hey, Boyd," said one, "yuh ain't really goin' to stand up to him, are yuh?"

"Whyn't yuh sort of laugh it off before Monday?" pressed another.

COOPER came out of his deep reverie, shrugged, and before anything more could be said, a distant shout, with a flutter of hoofs, was heard as the stage came dusting around the bend and into the street. For a moment, its coming turned the thoughts of those who had begun to look at the sheriff with shaking heads and tight lips from him.

The Concord ground to a halt with the driver joshing different ones in the crowd. The stage guard joined in, as he began to toss down the mail bags and a couple of valises.

The door opened and a small man stepped from the stage. Thick-lensed spectacles made his eyes look owlish. A chubby face was set on a long neck that jutted up from a stiff white collar. His brown suit was baggy, and the flat, narrow-brimmed hat he wore was pushed up in front and flopped down in back. He was a seedy-looking Easterner, with a somewhat comical appearance, a pale-faced runt, compared to the big, bronzed men around him.

The onlookers stared, then snickered. But, picking up the two large and seemingly heavy valises, the man gave them little attention, as he stared at the bright badge of the sheriff and staggered over to him with his burdens.

"Hello, Sheriff," he said cheerfully. "I'm one who always makes it a point, when I come to a strange place, to first see the chief of police, the marshal, or the sheriff. You can get the rules and regulations of a place from them and what I want to ask you now is: Can I get a license or something to peddle my goods? I'm a drummer from New York, and a doctor told me I'd have to come out West for my health. A dry climate, he said. Looking up places I saw the name of Dry Wells. A well is about the dryest thing I know of, so here I am. Call me Dobson—Eddie Dobson."

Cooper's face wrinkled into a smile. "Glad to see yuh, Eddie. Welcome to Dry Wells. I don't know that we got any laws to stop yuh from peddlin' yore wares, while yuh're gettin' some health. What yuh sellin'?"

"Suspenders!" answered the little man. "Good strong suspenders, with fancy eye-takin' colors."

"Well, that might be just the thing the boys need out here. Doggone it, I could use a pair myself, now that I come to think of it."

"You'll have a pair then," said the fast-talking drummer. "But first, Sheriff, I'd like to get to a hotel, if Dry Wells has one, and get cleaned up. It was a long, dusty ride."

"Right down the street, Dobson," answered Cooper. "Yuh can see the sign of the Staghorn Hotel."

The little drummer thanked the

sheriff, gave the onlookers a grin, and went shuffling along, straining under his load.

No one saw any more of Eddie Dobson until around ten o'clock that night. The Good Luck was going high, wide and handsome, when the peddler came into the big barroom. His owlish eyes roved around. Then, going to an open space at one end of the bar, with a grunt and a heave, he lifted on top of it one of the valises which had been burdening him earlier.

He announced to those lined up at the bar that he was going to show them the finest men's wear they ever saw. Opening his bag, he drew forth a handful of red, blue, pink, yellow and purple suspenders. They were strong, heavy elastic, with bright steel buckles, having fancy patterns of horseshoes, six-guns, Stetsons and other symbols of the cow country stamped into them. They took the eye—there was no doubt about that.

"There you are, gents!" called the drummer, loudly. "Step up and get all you want at a dollar apiece. But don't rush me. Use them for an exerciser, too, if you don't want them to hold up your pants. They're good and tough."

He took the ends of one and stretched it with quite an effort, then let it snap back.

Freckle-faced "Shorty" Lawson, of the Curved O Ranch, let out a whoop and pushed his way along the bar, waving two one-dollar bills.

"A pink and a bright red one, mister, is what I want!" he whooped. "Am I goin' to be the dude at the next dance over to Ramshead."

"I'll be right in yore class!" shouted another cowboy. "That yeller one takes my eye, brother. Toss her my way."

In less than a half-hour the little drummer's bag was empty, except for some half dozen of the attractive articles. But his pockets were filled with rolls of bills. His face was flushed and his eyes more owlish than ever. Once in a while his words tripped over his tongue also, for Eddie Dobson was somewhat boiled from imbibing with his newfound friends and customers.

"Hey, Eddie," Shorty Lawson shouted, "why don't yuh put some of that dinero yuh made into a good investment, and mebbe yuh'll double or triple it."

"Sure, investment, sure." Eddie grinned. "That's a good idea, a good idea, though what else could I put the money into, except more suspenders."

"Try the roulette wheel," went on the cowboy.

"Roulette?" inquired Eddie. "What's that?"

"Come on over here and I'll show yuh."

EDDIE followed the cowboy. Shorty pointed to a layout on the table containing numbers.

"Pick a number, Eddie," he said. "Then this gent with the green eyeshade will spin the wheel and that little ball will start jumpin' around. When the wheel stops, then the ball will fall in one of them red or black pockets underneath and mebbe it'll be yore number. Yuh got a chance to win different ways I'll show after yuh start playin'."

So Eddie put down a dollar and won; then five, and won again. A third time he raked in a win his eyes began to gleam, while his plays became higher and his winnings also, to the gleeful shouting of those around him.

The operator began to pinch his lips together and a jaw muscle worked, as he gritted his teeth in irritation, then anger. At intervals, as his hands and fingers drifted near the back of the pockets, he would shake his head slightly in annoyance.

Finally, the drummer pocketed five hundred dollars. That was when the operator saw the face of Curly Stanton in the background, and the jerk of the saloon owner's head as he called him. Asking another operator who was hovering nearby to take his place he made his way over to Stanton.

"What kind of a deal are yuh pullin', yuh sap!" growled the Good Luck owner. "I heard what that thick-wit won. We're supposed to win; not the customer."

"I know, Boss," whined the operator, "but the rubber pieces I put in the back of the pockets won't work. The rubber is too old, and the spring is out of them. I told yuh to get new bouncers. The ball won't jump out. It stays in the numbers he's been playin' and there ain't anything I can do about it."

"All right, Chick. Go back and say the game is closed for the night. Tell the dude he broke the bank and the play is over. Then watch him when he goes out. Find Jackson and get that dinero

back. I don't care how you do it, but get it."

The operator pulled the green eyeshade lower over his eyes and his hawk-nosed, narrow-chinned face took on a forced smile as he went back. After a play he informed the drummer and the rest what Stanton had told him to say. There were loud cheers and much back-slapping of Eddie. Then he was led back to the bar for more drinks.

Soon the excitement he had caused began to wear off and, seeing that no particular attention was being paid to him and also noticing two men where there should be only one, the drummer took his bag and went swaying through the batwings into the night. All in all he decided, as he carefully found his footing off the porch, his entrance into Dry Wells had been successful from a business, financial and friendship angle.

A few minutes later Eddie Dobson reversed his decision about the friendship part. As he passed a small alley, between two dark, closed stores, a whisper came out of the air, a lariat settled over his shoulders, jerking his arms to his sides, and he was pulled into the alley. Something small and hard punched into him.

"Stand still or yuh'll lay still for good!" a voice ordered softly.

Hands began going over his clothes and Dobson knew it was a holdup. He was being robbed by two men whose vague outlines were beside him. The drummer had never had much in his life, and the little money that did come his way he worked hard to get. With his selling went a certain amount of abuse and rough handling. His winning this night had been the quickest and highest amount of cash he'd had in a long time.

Anger struck into his brain, fired somewhat by the whisky working inside him. Not that he was a coward when sober—far from it. But now he was rash beyond cool thinking. That was why, unexpectedly, he brought up his knee into the stomach of the man closest to him.

A wild cry, then a groan was his reward from this one, while sudden oaths flowed from the lips of the other assailant. Then Eddie felt something crack against his head and pain slashed over his face, as he was knocked backward with reeling senses.

But he fought off the dizziness and, seeing a shadow by him, he managed to kick out again. Another grunt of pain proved that he had not missed his mark. But again he felt a blow, and this time it crashed into his shoulder.

"I'm all right, now," a voice said. "Let me at the runt. I'll fix him!"

Before Eddie could move, he felt two hammers pound into his face and darkness, blacker than the alley, spread around him, as he fell limply to the ground. . . .

IT WAS Sheriff Boyd Cooper who found the drummer. As usual, making his late rounds, and passing the alley where the drummer had been assaulted, he flashed the beam of the bull's-eye lantern he carried into the black depths. It was more a habit than an expectation of finding something, but men were found lying in the alley at various times. One would be sleeping off his night's drinking bout; another would have been beaten and robbed. So, as part of his routine, Cooper usually glanced into the alley.

His light swept over the form stretched out on the ground and in a minute he saw that it was the drummer. Cooper shook him and propped him to a sitting position.

The little man groaned, opened his eyes, and blinked into the light.

"My glasses," were the first words Dobson mumbled. "My glasses." The sweeping light found them.

"Here yuh are," said the lawman, "and they're not busted, either. It's me, Sheriff Cooper. Yuh hurt bad, Dobson?"

With the sheriff's help, Dobson struggled to his feet.

"I been robbed, Sheriff," he said, hastily going through his pockets. "Close to five hundred they took. Two gents lassoed me, dragged me here, then beat me up."

"Yuh was at the Good Luck, I s'pose?" asked the lawman.

Dobson nodded and explained the whole night's events.

"I guess I drank too much whisky, Sheriff," he admitted, "but those fellows were a good-natured bunch and took me as a friend. I always heard that Easterners never live down the fun the Westerners make of them. I was playing roulette, too, and won about five

hundred dollars. Now I'm cleaned of everything."

"You come on with me," said Cooper. "Let me take yuh to the hotel. Yore face is a mass of blood."

They found Dobson's bag nearby and the sheriff helped the drummer to his room. A bit later the peddler, after the cuts on his face had been taken care of, sat dejectedly in a chair. Cooper stood nearby, with a deep frown of thought pinching his brows.

"I don't know how long I'll be lawin' things around here after Monday, on account of I'm goin' to sling lead with an hombre," Cooper finally said. "But I can promise yuh'll never be pushed around again. Monday I'm meetin' Curly Stanton, the Good Luck owner, and we're goin' to settle things between us."

The drummer sat straighter. "You mean a—a gun-fight, Sheriff?"

Cooper nodded, then told of the causes leading up to the fight.

"In that case," said the peddler, "I'm not expecting you to do anything about what I lost. You have enough troubles of your own, Sheriff. I have some money hidden in my clothes that will keep me going until I can get a new stock of goods from the East."

"I'll tell yuh somethin', Dobson," said the sheriff confidentially. "When me and Stanton meet, I expect him to come out of the argument top-dog. He's gun-fast and I'm not. I'm advisin' yuh now not to go into the Good Luck again. Don't make any trouble about yore lost money. If yuh do yuh might get yoreself a trip to Boot Hill. Mind yore business and yuh'll be all right.

"I don't think I can do anything about yuh bein' robbed and beat up tonight, on account I ain't got any proof as to who done it, and it'll be tough to find some. But when me and Stanton meet, and if by luck I down him, I'll put a stop to anything like that happenin' to you or anybody else again. That is, if he don't put a stop to me. Anyways, as I said, stay out of the place, 'cause it might go worse with yuh. Well, so long. I'll see yuh around."

The sheriff left and the drummer began to pace up and down on the worn, faded rug in the small room. He wished he could help the lawman in some way. Dobson had liked the looks and attitude of Cooper from the first.

Resentment flowed through him when he thought of the Good Luck owner. No doubt it was Curly Stanton who had given orders for him to be robbed. Certainly those easy-going cowpunchers had had nothing to do with it. Stanton's record itself spoke against him. Perhaps he, Dobson, couldn't get his money back, but he'd feel better if in some way he could champion Cooper's cause.

He stuck his thumbs in the bright scarlet suspenders he wore and, with the smoke of a cigar funneling around him as he strode back and forth, the little drummer gave deep concentration to Sheriff Cooper's predicament.

A half-hour later he was flying down the street toward the lawman's office. He found Cooper bent over his desk, engrossed in making out a report. The drummer pulled a chair up close to him, then words, half-whispered, began to bubble from his lips. . . .

DRY WELLS the next Monday, at noon, seemed like a ghost town. No one was on the street, but there were many eyes peering from behind windows and doors. As if to mock the drama that was unfolding below, two buzzards spread their slow loops high above in the blue of the sky and from somewhere came the barking of a dog, at intervals.

Down the street with measured tread, small puffs of dust squirting up with each footfall, strode the white-haired lawman toward the Good Luck Saloon. From inside the place ribald laughter suddenly broke out and then the batwings were opened and Curly Stanton made his grinning appearance. With an easy assurance he went down the porch and, stepping out a few feet into the street, waited for Cooper.

The sheriff's hand gripped the butt of the six-gun on his right hip and Stanton, his smile growing wider, called out to big Red Jackson, who had come out of the saloon and was leaning against a post: "Look, Red, he's got to keep his paw on his gun for fear his hand'll shake so hard he won't be able to grab it at all."

Red laughed, but then his face hardened, and Stanton's also became more stern, as the sheriff stopped twenty feet from him.

"Let's get it done with, Stanton," said the lawman. "What kind of signal yuh want for the start?"

"Why, that dog," retorted the saloon owner. "The next time he barks is all right with me."

They waited. Then the dog barked, and like a gesture of magic, Stanton's hand turned into a white blur and a bright wink as his six-gun leaped from its holster. But faster still the sheriff's Colt flipped up out of leather like the snap of a whiplash!

His gun roared first. Stanton's followed. The saloon owner's bullet plowed at a slant into the dust of the street near Cooper's feet, but Stanton himself began to walk forward, his gun dropping as he spread out his hands, then loosely dived forward on his face. Dust fog, like a death shroud, writhed slowly up around him.

Everyone watching, saw his face turned into a red splash by the sheriff's bullet. Red Jackson cursed, and gunmetal gleamed in his fist.

The sheriff fired again and Red, tottering to the porch edge, spilled down the steps to the bottom and lay motionless.

"The sheriff started it, boys," somebody yelled. "Let's finish it!"

Men came from everywhere, guns in their hands, as they headed for the Good Luck with wild yells. Certain hirelings of Stanton's didn't stop to argue the matter. Instead, they rushed for the corral behind the Good Luck and, feverishly taking mounts, with just a bridle or halter to guide them, made fast tracks out of Dry Wells.

When the congratulations of winning and the rest of the excitement died down, Cooper and the drummer sat in the lawman's office, alone. The sheriff began to peel off his coat.

"Yuh know, Dobson," he said, "there won't be nobody rentin' that store of Stanton's, I don't believe, and I was figgerin' that when it come up for biddin' you might take it and open a suspender and men's wear shop. We need one of 'em."

Dobson's eyes grew wider with a sudden enthusiasm that swept through him. Then it swiftly disappeared.

"It'll take a lot to bid for it and stock it and such," he replied.

"I thought we might go into it together, Eddie," went on the sheriff, laying his coat on a chair. "I'd start the business for yuh, and you could run it. I'd be a silent partner sort of."

Enthusiasm lighted Dobson's face again. "It's a go, Sheriff," he said, "and I'll make good. I know I will."

"It's settled then, Eddie. Now give me a hand in takin' off this harness, will yuh? It shore made me one fast gunslinger. We'll keep it a secret, so nobody else can get onto our patent and mebbe shade me on the draw. I'll never forget, Eddie, that it was yore invention and it shore saved my life."

But Eddie, in his mind's eye a picture of windows filled with hundreds of brightly colored suspenders, with his own name lettered on the window, hardly heard, as he fumbled to remove the bright pink suspender elastic that was arranged around the sheriff's neck and right shoulder, going down his arm, where it was tied just above his wrist. The stretching power of it, held taut by the sheriff's hand on his gun-butt, was released as he made his draw. Its power helped snap up the heavy Colt far faster than Cooper could have done it otherwise.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

LAST RIDE FOR THE TOWN-TAMER

An Exciting Complete Novelet by NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

The men came riding out of the wash, just as the kid reached it

CIRCLE-C SHOWDOWN

By BEN FRANK

Range riders thought young Mem Muzzy was a lanky kid with a squeaky voice, but he knew how to handle a tough outlaw!

LEANING on the chopping block by the bunkhouse, Mem Muzzy kicked off a shoe and emptied a load of gravel out of it.

It was a big shoe, but wasn't any too large for Mem's foot. For fifteen, the kid was big all over. Skinny, but big-boned, with a lean, sunburned face under a mop of yellow hair, and deep blue, sensitive eyes that gave his face a wistful look.

But the thing that set the kid apart from anyone else was something that made those who knew about it think he was queer. Even crazy. Mem himself figured he must be a little crazy, too, for he could take a glance at something and remember exactly what he'd seen down to the smallest detail.

He'd never heard of "photographic memory." He simply thought he was about half nuts, and he was a little ashamed of his ability.

In the bunkhouse a moment before, the kid had taken a glance at page 34 in Shorty Short's book on how to play checkers. Now he began to recite:

"It is White's play. He moves from

1 to 5. Black, 10 to 6. White, 5 to 1. Black, 14 to 10. White—"

He caught himself up short. He mustn't do things like this. He'd guarded his secret well the past six months, and he was going to keep on guarding it, for when people found out about his freakish memory, they stared at him as if he had escaped from the bug-house.

He squirmed his foot back into the shoe, drew up the lace and went on around the Circle-C horse barn. He liked his job here, working for old "Honest" Chip Casper. Liked it especially because Bill Kirby worked for the old man, too.

Bill treated the kid like a man. He never made fun of Mem's big feet, or his fuzzy mop of yellow hair. For the first time in his kicked-around, lonely life, Mem Muzzy had found a friend, and he reckoned he'd stay on at the Circle-C, provided Bill Kirby stayed, too. And it seemed likely that Bill would be around for a long, long time, for Bill and the old man's daughter, Sally, were getting to the stage where it looked like wedding bells. Or, at least, it had until Sol Stone came along.

Thinking of Sol Stone, Mem scowled. To Mem's way of thinking, Sol was a handsome skunk. In the weeks that Sol had been working for old man Casper, he'd made Bill Kirby look like a fool. He was plenty slick, Sol was, and he'd been giving Bill a lot of competition. Not only with Sally, but also with old man Casper, who was beginning to think that his top hand, Bill, wasn't so top hand, after all.

Mem shuffled around the corner of the barn just in time to see Bill and Sol, mounted on a pair of mustangs, head for the pole corral gate at the same time. They reached it simultaneously, and Sol, by a little slick maneuvering, crowded Bill's horse against the fence.

Bill let out a cuss word and leaped to the ground. Sol hit the dirt right beside him and Mem felt his insides draw up into a hard, cold knot.

This was it. The showdown between Bill and Sol, and old man Casper, who hated fighting, wouldn't like it. Someone was likely to get fired, and Mem reckoned it wouldn't be Sol. For Bill, his craggy face white with fury, had planted the first blow. It caught Sol on his left shoulder and spun him halfway around.

But Sol was slick. He didn't come back at Bill. He didn't even look mad. He grinned and backed away a step.

"Hold yore hosses, Bill," he said loudly.

"I'm through holdin' my hosses!" Bill gritted. "I've taken all I'm goin' to take from you!"

THEN Honest Chip Casper came out of the horse barn like a cyclone out of the southwest, a twelve-foot blacksnake whip in his horny old hands. The whip streaked out with a harsh hiss, and the lash popped like a pistol shot.

"Break it up!" the old man roared. "Or I'll peel the hide off both of yuh!"

Mem felt a little sick. He guessed this was the end for Billy Kirby. And without Bill working on the Circle-C, Mem knew he wouldn't be able to stay on very long. Bill always took Mem's part when the going got rough. Jobs for a fifteen-year-old were mighty scarce, and if he had to leave the Circle-C, he guessed he'd have some hungry days ahead.

The two men backed away from each other and that deadly blacksnake.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Casper," Sol said smoothly. "Bill jumped me, an' I was just tryin' to keep him off."

"I know," the old man said. "I saw it."

Bill was too angry to defend himself. His craggy face still white, his big fists balled, he stood there with the hot sun against his red hair, glaring at Sol.

The old man coiled the whip around his arm and cursed into his whiskers.

"I don't stand for fightin' among my men!" he said harshly. He turned squarely on Bill. "I oughta fire yuh," he said. "But since yuh been with me a long time, I'll give yuh one more chance if yuh want it."

Bill got hold of himself, and a scared look came into his eyes. Mem guessed that Bill was thinking of Sally, that if he left the Circle-C, he'd lose her for sure to Sol Stone.

"I'll take that chance," he said tightly.

The old man suddenly looked all in. Maybe he was thinking that Sally was the real trouble between Bill and Sol, and he was wishing that things were different. The old man didn't like trouble. He liked things to move along smoothly. Liked his jokes, and an occasional game of friendly, honest poker with his men,

or a round of checkers with Shorty Short.

He turned and saw Mem standing against the barn.

"Bill," he said, his voice sounding tired, "you and the kid hook up the buckboard and go to town for groceries. The cook has a list of things a mile long."

He turned heavily and went back into the barn. Sol swung into the saddle, a well-satisfied look on his handsome face. Bill Kirby crossed the lot to where Mem stood.

"Come on, kid," he said quietly. "Help me harness the team."

Mem lifted his bony shoulders away from the rough planks of the barn. He still felt a little weak and scared.

"Sure, Bill," he said, his voice squeaking up on him.

But Bill didn't seem to notice the squeak. Bill was swell. He never found things to laugh at. He was the kind of a hombre that would make Miss Sally the kind of a husband she needed and deserved.

Mem followed Bill into the barn. By the time they got the horses hooked to the buckboard, Bill was his old self again. They rattled up in front of the sprawling ranchhouse, and Mem held the horses while Bill went to the door for the grocery list.

Sally Casper brought it out to him. Sally was a small neat girl with dark hair, flashing black eyes and a laugh on her red lips. No wonder, Mem thought, that Bill was crazy about her.

Bill came back to the buckboard and leaped up to the spring seat. He had the grocery list in his big fingers and a long grin on his homely face.

Mem got a glimpse of the grocery list.

"Gosh," he said, "looks like we'll bring back a load."

"It takes a lot of grub to keep an outfit like the Circle-C goin'," Bill told him, folding the paper and tucking it into his shirt pocket along with his sack of Bull Durham.

The south wind was in their faces, hot and strong, smelling of sage and dust. Mem drove, holding the horses down to a steady trot. Bill didn't have much to say. Mem guessed he was thinking about Sally, and maybe worrying about the way Sol Stone was cutting in on him.

They came to the little cowtown of Gateway, and Mem pulled up at the railroad crossing to let a cattle train pass. Bill pulled out tobacco and papers and rolled a quirly.

"Drive around by the jail," he said, "and we'll say howdy to Mike Jeffers." He grinned sourly. "Maybe I'd be smart to ask Mike for a job."

"Reckon he'd give me a job, too?" Mem asked worriedly, remembering that Jeffers owned a ranch south of Gateway.

"Maybe." Grinning, Bill held a match to his smoke.

The caboose rattled by, and Mem shook out the lines.

"Forty cars," Bill murmured.

"Thirty-nine," Mem corrected absently.

"Yuh're wrong, kid. Forty. I counted 'em."

"Nope," Mem returned, heading the team into the dusty street. "Thirty-nine. The first three cars were Union Pacific. The next one was a Santa Fe. Then there was a Chicago, Northwestern, another Union Pacific—"

HE CAUGHT himself up short. Bill was staring at him out of wide eyes, and the kid felt himself grow cold. Even a swell hombre like Bill Kirby might think he was kind of crazy if he found out about his freakish memory.

"I guess yuh're right," he said quickly. "I wasn't payin' much attention, only to them first four or five cars."

Bill had trouble getting his smoke going in the wind, and he didn't say any more about the number of cars. Mem let out a sigh of relief; his secret was still safe.

They stopped in front of the jail and went into the office. Sheriff Mike Jeffers sat behind his desk, half buried in a pile of old dodgers.

"Cleanin' house?" Bill grinned.

The blocky-faced sheriff grinned back and waved toward the mess of papers.

"Things was gettin' so cluttered up I couldn't find my way around," he said.

Mem picked up a handful of dodgers and leafed through them while Bill and the sheriff talked about one thing and another. Bill hadn't stopped to see Jeffers about a job, after all. He'd simply come for a visit with an old friend.

Mem felt mighty relieved about this. He guessed Bill hadn't any intention of leaving the Circle-C. Maybe things

would work out after all, and Bill and Sally would get married and keep the old ranch going, even after old Honest Chip Casper passed on.

Right in the middle of one of the sheriff's long-winded stories, Bill fished for the makings, and suddenly his craggy face went blank.

"I'll be a son of a gun!" he croaked. "I've lost that grocery list!"

He jumped to his feet and began to search through his other pockets.

Mem laid the dodgers down and grinned. In his mind's eye, he could see every item on the list.

"Don't let it worry yuh—" he began, then stopped in confusion.

"What do yuh mean, don't let it worry yuh?" Bill yipped.

Mem did some fast thinking.

"I saw a piece of paper in the bottom of the buckboard," he lied quickly. "I bet that was it."

"Go take a look," Bill said. "And if that's the list, go on over and order the things before it gets lost again, will yuh, Mem?"

The kid hurried out to the wagon and pretended to look for the paper. Of course, it wasn't there.

"Here it is!" he called back to Bill.

"Good! You go on to the store. I'll be along in a minute or two."

Mem walked toward the store, stopping at the post office on the way and digging an old piece of paper out of the wastebasket. When he ordered the groceries, he held the paper in front of his eyes and pretended to read off the long list. He wasn't running any chance of having someone find out what a crazy memory he had.

Darkness had swooped down before Mem and Bill returned to the Circle-C. By the time they got things unloaded and had stowed away enough grub for four ordinary people, a friendly poker game was in progress in the bunkhouse. Everybody was in it except Shorty Short. Shorty had his checker book open and was playing himself a game of checkers.

As usual, Sol Stone and old man Casper were winning. Not much, for the stakes were low, but winning just the same.

Bill didn't join in the game. He crossed to the mirror, slicked back his red hair and went outside. Mem knew he was going to see Sally.

The kid kicked off his big shoes and flopped down on his bunk, watching the poker game without interest. The boys played a few hands almost every evening now—ever since Sol started working for the old man.

Mentally Mem went back over some of the previous games, recalling the winnings and losses of the players. Suddenly he sat bolt upright. He'd just tallied Sol's winnings. Even if the stakes had been low, Sol had managed to come out way ahead during the weeks he'd been at the Circle-C.

Hastily he totaled Honest Chip Casper's winnings and discovered that the old man was only $3.50 ahead. All the other players had taken losses. That made it look as if Sol Stone might be pulling some fast ones, letting the old man win a little just to make him happy, but taking the big money for himself in little dribbles so no one would feel too badly hurt.

Mem thought back through the dozens of hands that had been played and realized that when Sol had the deal, things usually fell his way. On the face of it, it looked as if Sol might have a trick or two up his sleeve.

After that, Mem watched the play carefully. He didn't catch Sol cheating, but he had a feeling that all was not on the level. Too, Sol Stone was mighty professional in his playing. Mem knew, because once he lived with an uncle who was a professional gambler.

WHEN old man Casper broke up the game by saying it was time to hit the hay, Mem turned over and went to sleep. He dreamed that Sol Stone was cramming cards down his throat, choking him, and he woke up in a cold sweat.

Sitting up, he saw that the bunkhouse door stood open, letting the moonlight flood into the room. He swung his feet to the floor, got up and went to the door. Back of him, someone snored deeply. Outside a man sat on the chopping block. It was Bill Kirby. His wide shoulders sagged, and the wind played through his red hair. Bill's face was turned so that Mem could see it, and he looked sick, whipped.

Mem stumbled back to his bunk, knowing that Bill had lost out with Sally Casper, for that was the only thing he could think of that would make Bill look the way he did.

Hours later, he heard Bill come in and climb into his bunk. But Bill didn't go to sleep. Mem knew, because he could hear him turning and tossing until gray dawn poked a finger through the east window of the bunkhouse.

Next morning, the old man told Mem to oil the east windmill. The kid went into the horse barn and was saddling his old knock-kneed paint when Shorty Short and another ranny came along. They didn't pay any attention to the kid.

"Bill's a good man," Shorty said. "I shore hate to see him leave the Circle-C."

The kid let the bridle slip out of his hands. Awkwardly he stooped and picked it up.

"When's Bill leavin'?" he asked hollowly.

"Sunday." Shorty grinned thinly at Mem. "Goin' to miss him, ain't yuh, kid?"

Mem slipped the bit into the paint's unwilling mouth. He didn't reply. He was afraid to trust his voice.

Riding around the barn the kid headed east along a row of cottonwood windbreakers. When he came to the end of the trees, he saw Sally leaning against a gnarled cottonwood trunk, her dark hair flying in the wind. Sol Stone was with her, towering over her, one hand braced against the tree trunk. They were so busy talking and laughing they didn't see the kid.

Sick at heart, Mem rode on. When he got to the windmill, he slid to the ground and sat down on the plank curb to do some thinking. None of it was good. He knew why Bill was leaving the Circle-C. Bill and Sally had fallen out the night before. That was because Sol Stone's slick ways and good looks had turned Sally's head.

He sighed and picked up the oil can. He liked Bill. Bill was the first real friend he'd ever had. He liked Sally, too, and he had a feeling that Sol wasn't nearly good enough for her. In fact, since last night, he'd come to believe that Sol was downright dishonest. But belief and proof are two different things. Even if Sol did win a lot of poker hands, that didn't make him a crook. It could be that Sol was just lucky at cards.

At the top of the mill, Mem got busy with the oil can. From up there, he could see miles in all directions, and just then he spotted two horsemen riding toward each other. One of them looked like Sol Stone. The riders met and disappeared into a deep wash.

Curious, Mem climbed to the ground, mounted the paint and rode toward the gully. The men came up out of the wash just as the kid reached the edge of it, and he found himself facing the handsome Sol Stone and a hard visaged stranger.

Sol pulled up short and smiled crookedly.

"One of the old man's high-powered hands," he said with a twist of his thumb toward Mem.

The man called Hank looked the kid over and grinned.

"What holds him together?" he asked.

Sol laughed. "Someday I'll take him apart and find out," he said.

Mem felt his face flush. He took another look at Sol's companion and knew he'd seen the man someplace before.

The two men rode on, and Mem headed back toward the ranch. He remembered hearing the old man tell Sol to ride out to the lowlands to see if there were any strays along the line fence. Sol had gone considerably out of his way to get to the lowlands, but maybe that was because he wanted to meet this stranger.

The kid's sunburned face puckered into a deep frown, and he closed his eyes. He was feeling back through his freakish memory for the face of the stranger.

All through the day, that face gave him trouble, because he made the mistake of looking for a person he'd met in the past. He didn't find the person, and the harder he searched, the more elusive the memory became.

He didn't find what he was looking for until the ranch hands had finished supper and were relaxing in the long shade of the bunkhouse.

SHORTY SHORT was seated in the doorway scowling at his book on how to play checkers. Bill Kirby sat with his back against the chopping block, cigarette smoke rolling up around his unhappy face. Sol Stone and some of the other men were squatting in a circle, talking. Mem, his big feet stretched out in front of him, lay on the short grass staring up into the fading blue of the sky.

Once, he turned to look at Shorty, saw the pages of his book riffle in the wind. It was those flapping pages that did the trick. It reminded him of the dodgers he'd flipped through back in the sheriff's office. Sure enough, he remembered seeing the stranger's face on one of those dodgers.

Mem closed his eyes and examined the dodger in his mind's eye. Every detail of it was as clear as if he had it right before him.

"Henry Moad," it read. "Professional gambler and confidence man. Served five years in the state prison for forging a check. Works with an unknown partner. Is now suspected of—"

That was as much of the page as Mem had seen. But what he remembered was enough to make him know for sure that Sol Stone wasn't on the level. Sol might even be Henry Moad's unknown partner, and as likely as not, the two men were planning to fleece Honest Chip Casper out of his ranch. Sol's making a play for Sally, no doubt, was part of the scheme.

The kid got to his feet, thinking he'd go tell the old man what he knew. And then he sat down again. If he told the old man about Sol and Henry Moad, and how he remembered Moad's picture on a dodger, the old man would laugh at him. Even if he proved that the sheriff did have such a dodger, he'd never be able to prove that Sol knew Moad, because certainly Sol wouldn't admit to any such thing. All in all, it seemed that Mem couldn't do a thing about Sol Stone.

Old man Casper came waddling around the corner of the bunkhouse, a fresh cigar sticking out of his round face. Sol looked up and nodded at him. Bill kept his head down. Shorty Short turned another page in his checker book.

The old man grinned all around.

"Coolin' off," he said.

"Just right for poker playin'," suggested Sol.

The old man winked and nodded. The boys were agreeable. Shorty Short moved over on the step, and everyone went into the bunkhouse except Shorty, Bill and Mem.

"If you'd play poker instead of reading that book," Sol kidded, "you might improve your mind."

Some of the boys chuckled. Shorty closed the book with a snap.

[*Turn page*]

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"I might as well play poker," he growled, getting up and shuffling into the bunkhouse. "Ain't none of you jaspers got brains enough to play a good checker game!"

Chairs scraped, and someone lit a lamp.

Mem glanced at Bill Kirby. Bill was looking toward the ranchhouse where a light gleamed through a window of the old house. It was Sally's window. Suddenly he shoved to his feet, his face stony.

"What the heck!" he said. "I might as well get in that game, too!"

Mem leaped to his feet. He had it! If his scheme worked, Bill would have a clear field with Sally, and then, maybe, he'd stay on with the old man.

He followed Bill through the door.

Bill pulled up a chair and sat down heavily. He'd been saving his money for the day when he could buy Sally the kind of a ring a girl like her should have, so he had a sizable roll to put into the game. He played recklessly now, and his recklessness seemed to be contagious. The first thing everyone knew, a lot of money was piled in the center of the table.

It was Sol Stone's deal. Mem's eyes went over the tense faces about the table. The cowhands leaned forward in their chairs. Honest Chip Casper chewed viciously at his cold cigar, and his horny fingers tapped nervously on the tabletop.

Shorty Short, eyes half-closed, kept licking his lips and staring hard at a ten-dollar bill he'd just shoved into the pot. Bill Kirby's craggy face was like a brown block of granite. But Sol's face was expressionless.

Bill glanced at his cards, peeled a greenback off his roll and raised. Some of the boys got out then, but Shorty and the old man stayed in. Sol looked at the fat pot. His eyes glittered and a trickle of sweat ran along his smooth cheek. He reminded Mem of his gambling uncle when he was about ready to take a bunch of suckers for a cleaning.

Sol met the raise and then calmly laid another bill on the pile.

"It'll cost you ten more to see my cards," he said. But Shorty thought a good long while before he came across with another ten.

The old man and Bill didn't hesitate. Sol laid down his hand—three aces and a pair of queens.

OLD man Casper threw his cigar into the open unlit stove. Shorty Short cursed, and Bill laughed grimly as he tossed his cards on the table. Sol Stone, his face a mask, began to rake in the pot. This was the time, Mem knew, to try his scheme. He reached out a bony hand and picked up the cards. Inside, he felt scared. Maybe that was because of the way Sol looked up at him.

"I had an uncle who was a gambler," the kid squeaked. "Showed me some things about cards. He was right good at markin' 'em an'—" His voice stuck in his throat.

Sol Stone got to his feet.

"Come on, kid," he said impatiently. "Yuh're holdin' up the game."

Mem moved back a step, fanning the cards out face up, glancing at them as he did so and stamping their order in that photographic, freakish mind of his. Then he bunched the cards and laid them face down on the table.

He didn't offer any explanation. He simply took five cards off the top and turned the sixth one face up. It was an ace.

He counted off ten more cards and turned up the eleventh. Another ace. Three more cards, and he turned up a queen. The next card was a third ace. Then he turned up the forty-eighth card, which was a second queen!

Every man in the room stared at the five cards lying face up on the table—the exact hand with which Sol Stone had won!

"Easy when yuh know how to read the backs," Mem squeaked.

Stone's startled eyes shifted uneasily over the tight faces. He tried to laugh, but it came out more like the bleat of a scared sheep.

"How'd yuh do that, kid?" he asked.

"How'd he do it, my foot!" Chip Casper exploded. "It oughta be easy for you to tell us that!"

"Yeah," Shorty rumbled, "you confounded crook!"

He moved toward his bunk and the six-gun hanging on a nail above it, but Bill Kirby got ahead of him, caught his arm and held it.

Sol Stone was already through the door and pounding along the hard path toward the horse barn. He'd forgotten his winnings and his fancy spare

[*Turn page*]

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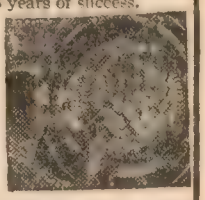

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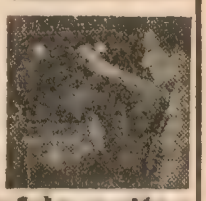

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clothes that hung at the foot of his bunk.

"Turn me loose, Bill," Shorty bellowed. "Just let me have one shot at him!"

"Take it easy," said Bill. "Yore money's still on the table."

"Yeah," old man Casper growled. "Let the crook go. Just see that he don't take nothin' that don't belong to him."

Some of the boys gathered up Sol's clothes and carried them to the barn. A little later, a horse clattered away along the trail to the west. Evidently Sol Stone had decided the Circle-C was no longer of interest to him.

The boys came back into the bunkhouse, and one of them, Mem noticed, had a skinned knuckle.

Shorty Short turned on Mem with a suddenness that startled him.

"Look, kid," he said, "show us how Sol had them cards marked."

Mem felt his knees turn wobbly. There wasn't anything he could show Shorty! He could only explain by telling about that freakish memory of his, and then everybody, even Bill Kirby, would think he was a little crazy.

It was Bill who saved him. Bill picked up the deck and tossed them into the stove. Then he chucked an old newspaper in on top of the cards and held a lighted match to it.

"Let's just forget that we was taken for a bunch of suckers," he said.

The paper caught and flared up brightly.

"A good idea, Bill," the old man agreed approvingly. "I reckon we've all been taken in. Even Sally. Seems as though we'd all be better off if we stuck to a game we know—like checkers."

Shorty Short grinned.

"Now yuh're talkin' sense!"

Bill and the old man looked at each other for a long moment, then went out together and headed for the house.

Mem kicked off his big shoes and climbed into his bunk. He still felt a little wobbly, but he was mighty happy about the whole thing. His secret was still safe, and he guessed that Bill wouldn't be leaving Sunday. Also, the kid had a strong hunch that Sally and Bill would be holding hands again before the night was half over. Which certainly was the proper thing for a couple of swell people like Bill and Sally to do.

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 8)

waste multiplies. Lumbermen are used to this loss of bark and slabs and punky rejects and sawdust and millends. For that has always existed. In fancy-talk magazines you've likely read about wondrous ways in which they make useful projects out of log waste. The truth is, these reforms are entirely experimental.

Slashing and mill waste are burned, same as always, enough to heat all the homes and stores and offices of the nation. The only working innovation in the Eugene area is a pilot alcohol plant that utilizes a tiny fraction of the sawdust thereabouts.

You read about lumber-preserving processes. The only one I came onto was a big vat-like building where the Southern Pacific railroad treats ties and poles with creosote. They run a train of loaded flat cars into the treating plant, shut it up and turn on the hot, vaporized creosote. Then pull out the steaming load, all black and smelly as a million sheep-dipping pens.

And still you wonder, where does all the timber come from? And where does it go?

I reckon it's more interesting to answer the last question first.

Ninety per cent of our terrific present timber cut is being shipped abroad. Only ten per cent goes to relieve our domestic housing shortage. These are the figures given lately by some Western Congressmen who are raising a row about it at Washington.

Now, where do the logs that make our homes—one out of ten of them—come from? Northwest citizens know that nearly every accessible timber tract was logged during the war.

The National Forests

Well, this year the government appropriated $2,500,000 to build logging roads into untouched parts of the Western National Forests. These roads are being blasted into virgin wilderness now. The aim is to produce 500 million board feet, 400 million feet of it in Oregon, most of the rest out of California and Washington.

This plan is called a subsidy program and

[*Turn page*]

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encourages logging in areas where in past years it was forbidden. It means cutting a large part of the standing timber that the Forest Service set aside for future generations of builders. It amounts to a reversal

of our conservation policy that was started in 1907 by Theodore Roosevelt.

These are the facts. Lumbermen and politicians know the facts but don't like to talk about 'em. It is part of the cost of war, the cost of rebuilding a war-ravaged world.

There are unknowing folks that say America is blessed and fortunate for having known none of the scars of war. In the Northwest, they know better. A century will pass before the scars of war are healed in the Northwest's timberlands.

Potatoes and Prunes

But there are more cheerful things to see and think about out West. So I'll make some remarks about potatoes and prunes and pavement.

First, potatoes. Enough potatoes to feed the world are grown out West. The big problem has been shipping. That put the mind of one young ex-newsboy to work. Today he is the World's Potato King. He is Jack Simplot of Burley, Idaho.

Young Simplot perfected dehydrating processes until you can put a sack of potatoes in your shopping bag. His latest development is packaged mashed potatoes. Pour hot water on a handful of whitish flakes, stir and lo, in three minutes you have fluffy, creamy mashed potatoes that contain more vitamins and minerals, I'm told, than the old-fashioned kind.

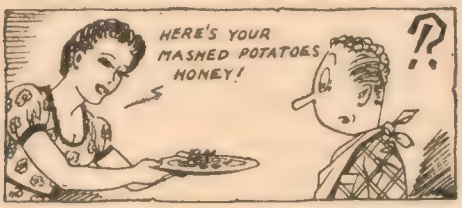
HELP YOUR RED CROSS

Jack Simplot has become a legend in Idaho. They tell yarns about him like early woodsmen used to spin about the imaginary Paul Bunyan.

During the war, according to one of these yarns, Jack Simplot made a deal to supply the Army with something over 1500 CARLOADS of potatoes. When news of the deal reached Washington, a flock of brass hats leaped into the air and yelled that nobody in creation could contract to supply that many potatoes.

A pullman carload of big brass was rushed to Idaho to investigate, where they found Jack Simplot finishing the Army shipment and taking on a 940-carload job for the Navy.

Potato flour, potato-and-onion soup mix and dried mashed potatoes are standard



Simplot products now, with a flock of other dried foods in the laboratory stage. Through this enterprise, Jack Simplot has become a millionaire several times over—and he's still in his thirties.

Now, about prunes. The lowly prune has been the object of ridicule and the subject of cheap boarding house jokes for many a year. So it came time for somebody to do something about it.

Somebody did. A large and mighty luscious prune was developed. It became the prune of all prunes.

This takes us back to rich, lovely Willamette Valley in the vicinity of Eugene, where the fancy prune is grown. I managed to get a few to taste, out of the dryer where the owner was watching like a hawk, to shotgun any prunejackers that might happen along.

I tell you, hombres and hombresses, those extra-special prunes simply melt in your mouth! Unlike any other fruit I ever tasted. They're dried for high-class confectioners and so far are mighty scarce. The grower gets 5 cents apiece for them!

America's Roads

Next, pavement. America's roads are older even than the worn cars and trucks and busses that travel on them. Most highways, even main ones, are far behind the times. They were laid out and built around 25 years ago.

[*Turn page*]

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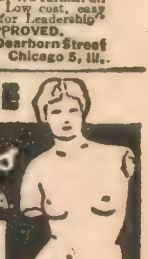

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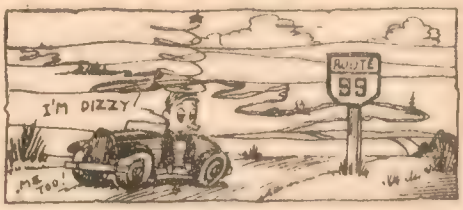
In those days it was a custom to pay road contractors by the mile. As a result, it paid them to lay a twisty route around swell or dip, rather than dig a cut or make a fill. A route that is snaky to the point of plumb foolishness is Highway 99 in southern Oregon. In some parts the distance traveled can be



reduced by nearly half through use of modern road-making machinery—and through doing away with by-the-mile contracting.

All of which leads up to saying that this is exactly what is being done. Old 99 is being resurveyed and modernized. So are scores of other important cross-country arteries. In time soon to come, you'll get places faster, sooner and easier.

So the old must make way for the new. Old trees are felled, opening forests to new growth. The mashed potato is being brought up-to-date. The old prune is having its face lifted, becomes a tidbit that rivals rare, tropical fruit. And old highways that have borne their brunt of commerce and pleasure are covered over or by-passed by broad, smooth, high-speed long trails. The West is on the move, hombres and hombresses! And I'll be moving along myself now—until next issue.

—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

ON THE trail of a peg-legged killer, known as "Sam, the Stick," Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy "Shorty" Watts, those two redoubtable lawmen of Painted Post, uncovered evidence pointing to the fact that the peg-legged outlaw and his gang were set and ready to pull off the biggest cattle rustling job ever seen in Arizona.

Moving swiftly, and with a plan to thwart the owlhoot raid, Steele and Shorty Watts rode through the night toward the jumbled rimrock overlooking a canyon in which a great Box L herd was being held by a few weary cowhands. It was along this rimrock, Steele believed, that the longriders would be gathered, awaiting only the signal to commence operations.

As they neared their objective, Steele called a halt and handed his little deputy a block of sulphur matches.

"Maybe yuh better explain again what I'm supposed to do," Shorty whispered, patting the canteen of kerosene he toted. "In short, simple words suited to my small caliber intellect."

"Make for those cat-tails down below the Box L, where the flat funnels into the headwaters of Squaw Creek," Steele said quietly. "Whack off an armful. Then cross the stage road, soak 'em in kerosene, and when the shootin' starts—"

"I savvy now," Shorty broke in. "A fire barricade on the road. Even stampeded cattle won't cross fire. But—but that means I'll miss out on the main show!"

"Not if our wooden-legged friend or some of his companeros try to buck the fireline. In that case—well, it won't be dull."

"Okay. And you?"

"I'm slippin' on through to the herd camp. A tip-off will help make up for those cowhands' lack of numbers, and our not knowing the time of the attack or the signal to start it rollin'."

Steele hushed at a sound back-trail—the sound of a horse hard-ridden over the rocky trail.

"Get goin,' segundo!" he whispered sharply. [*Turn page*]

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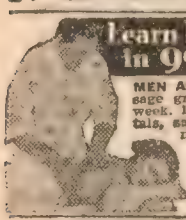

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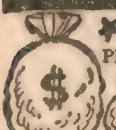

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Shorty kneed his pinto away from the trail. A few yards down-slope he came onto a shale slide. His going made more commotion than he would have wished for. The nearing rider must have heard the cascading rock for the hoofbeats suddenly stopped.

"Hiya, below!" he sang out. "Who's there?"

If Shortly had answered, his shrill, rusty voice would have been a dead give-away of his identity. So Steele promptly spoke up.

"Who's askin'?"

"Bud Northcutt. I got news and it ain't good news."

"Let's hear it," Steele called.

"Show yoreself first."

"Can't leave station here. It's orders. What's happened?"

The unseen messenger hesitated for a dragging moment or two.

"Shorty Horse and Long Colt came a-visitin' the Tecolote Club in Los Pasos," he said finally. "There was some fireworks, and I think they learned somethin'. Chances are they're onto the game and headed this away."

There was a familiar twang in the voice that Steele now recognized. The rider was the lone afternoon customer he and Shorty had seen at the Tecolote. He recalled that the bartender had addressed the man as "Bud."

This sour-faced Bud Northcutt must surely know the plan of attack, signal and all. If that information could only be wrested from him, their chances of turning back this raid would be greatly improved, Steele knew.

"You and me, we better throw in together, Bud." Steele pitched his voice to sharp-edged alarm. "Dangle along down here."

"Don't know who you are yet," the other retorted suspiciously.

"What odds? This ain't no time to bawl out an introduction. C'mon."

Hoofs stirred. Steele drew a long Colt, tossing it to grip the long barrel. He was thankful for the moonless dark that made him only an unidentifiable blur in the night. He hoped he had manipulated his voice so

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as to avoid detection.

Bud Northcutt advanced warily. He came into Steele's vision, a dark blob in the night. A rope's length separated the two men, then fifteen feet, then ten. Just out of arm reach Northcutt drew up. He leaned forward, peering forward at the horse and rider blended into the black shadow of a low thicket.

"Reckon I better ride on without no more dilly-dallyin'," he blurted.

Steele made out a revolver in Northcutt's hand, at ready across one thigh. Jumping him wasn't going to be easy.

"Who do I say I met up with?" Northcutt demanded.

The time had come. But not so handily as Steele had hoped it would. It called for a showdown. He flipped the Colt again so that now he gripped the butt.

"Drop it, I've got yuh covered, Northcutt!" he barked.

"Steele!" the other croaked in a terror-stricken voice. He dropped the revolver to the rocky trail.

There was only a hundred to one chance that it would happen that way. But it did. The revolver must have been cocked. It ex-

[*Turn page*]

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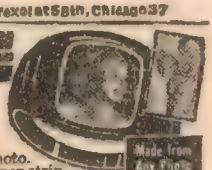

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ploded with a flash and roar as it hit the ground, and Northcutt's horse leaped crazily ahead. Riding low, Northcutt whooped and spurred. Then out across to the west, faint in the distance, another gun answered. The signal for the attack!

Sending the gelding onto mid-trail with a leap, Steele blazed at the vanishing Northcutt. He heard an answering yell. It sounded like a hurt yell. But Northcutt pounded on and Steele followed at a breakneck run.

His heart sank as he went. For a scattered volley drifted from on ahead, in the direction of the herd camp. The raid was on!

And Sheriff Blue Steele had his work cut out for him. We predict that you'll get some real thrills out of this trigger-quick Painted Post novelet, SHORT HORSE AND LONG COLT, by Tom Gunn. In the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN, folks. You'll not want to miss it.

A companion novelet in the same issue, THE NESTER, by that ever-popular author Barry Scobee, is one that you'll not soon forget. It's not a gun-shootin' story, nor is it a cheerful one, but if it doesn't get inside you and move you and make you pretty proud of your forefathers who homesteaded the West, then we are no judges of human nature.

THE NESTER is life with the glamor peeled off. It's reality. It has a third-dimensional quality about it seldom equalled in Western fiction. In short, it's a memorable story we think you will like.

Also in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN, will be a third big novelet by another favorite author, Nels Leroy Jorgensen. This one, called LAST RIDE FOR THE TOWN-TAMER, is a fast-action yarn that will hold your interest from beginning to end.

To prove our point, we give you in the following the first page of LAST RIDE FOR THE TOWN-TAMER exactly as the author has written it:

Bob Vidal emerged from the general store, and there almost in front of him was the girl. He knew her for Tony Ransome's girl. And Ransome was the man he had to bring in, somehow, dead or alive.

She was about twenty, and she had bronze-brown hair and tawny eyes and the most provocative mouth he'd ever seen. And right this minute the eyes were thoroughly hostile. Bob Vidal pulled off his wide white hat and jerked a bow.

"Mornin', ma'am," he said. "Yuh're sure lookin' pretty."

He was afraid of women in general and he always covered that up by an excess of politeness. He knew the girl was lovely and he knew what she represented. He knew she hated him—and he knew why. She had reason, he supposed.

But Inez Mulcahy could hate anyone and be forgiven—she was that beautiful. She stood almost up to his shoulder, but high heels in calfskin boots made her look taller. Her lustrous eyes went to the star just showing where his vest flared open.

"Morning, Mr. Marshal," she drawled in response. "It's almost noontime. Haven't you any of your

victims to honor in Boot Hill today? Or do you wait till sundown?"

"Usually I wait till sundown, ma'am," he responded with gravity. Then, quirking his lips, he added, "That's when the rats start comin' out. They hole up all day."

She tossed her head, and turning abruptly away from him, made for the hotel entrance.

Bob Vidal was a drifting man, but her beauty was something he had never been able to ignore. As she left him, his long, dark face looked older. His gray eyes took on a hard opacity. He knew it was probably fated that he'd have to kill the man she loved. That was not a pleasant thought.

He watched the fringes of her short skirt whisk as she went in through the hotel doorway, and he replaced his hat. At the same instant, two shots crashed to break the somnolent quiet of the main street, and he whirled, already half crouching, fingers ready for his gun.

He had just time to catch sight of a buckboard with two high-stepping bays in the fore. He saw it halt, then swerve momentarily, and he saw a man go down in a cloud of dust. In the high-heeled riding boots, which hampered him afoot, Vidal started running for the spot.

You're going to get some swell reading enjoyment in LAST RIDE FOR THE TOWN-TAMER, in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN! Then, of course, the next issue will have all the regular departments and the usual collection of prime short stories. It's a good issue, folks, and one you'll certainly want to read!

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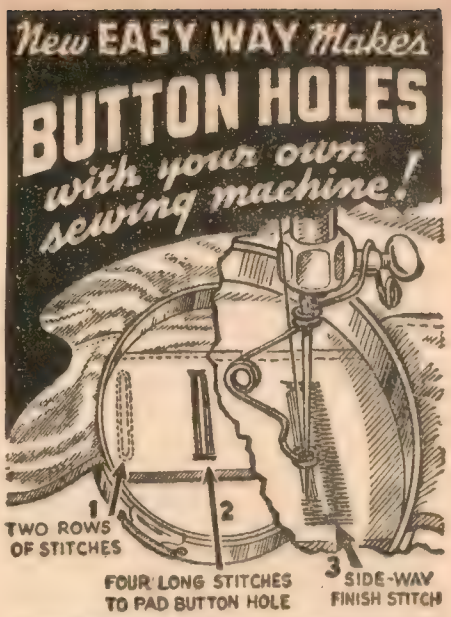

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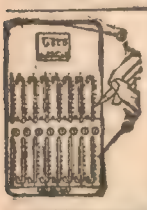

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from POPULAR WESTERN readers. And to you who haven't as yet dropped us a line, we extend a cordial invitation to do so. We really enjoy hearing from readers, as it is the best means we have of learning whether or not we're pleasing you with the stories we are printing in the magazine.

First, from a woman way out in God's country:

I like POPULAR WESTERN very much, and from the letters you publish in the back of the magazine, think some people pretty hard to please. But I guess there are some people who don't even like candy. Being crazy about horses, dogs, guns, and the great outdoors, I read several Western magazines, but POPULAR WESTERN is my favorite. I like best the stories of Sheriff Blue Steele and Shorty Watts. Also, awhile back there was a story called THE PUNCHER WHO COULDN'T RIDE, which I thought tops. So long and good luck.—*Shirley Kennedy, Spokane, Washington.*

Well, thank you muchly, Shirley. Them's mighty pretty words. Anyway, we know we'll be pleasing one good reader with the Blue Steele story coming up in the next issue. We don't think you'll be the only one, however. Leastwise, we hope not.

I've been reading POPULAR WESTERN for five years and think it's swell. I especially liked the Blue Steele story, MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. Keep up the good work.—*Marvin Coley, Lucama, N. C.*

Oops, there's another Blue Steele admirer. That makes two out of two. And that's fair

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country ropin', pardners. Yes, suh! But comes a kink in the rope now, from out Denver way:

I like POPULAR WESTERN on the whole, but your Sheriff Blue Steele is pretty hard to take. I just don't like the fellow. He's too superior. There's not a thing he doesn't know or can't figure out on the spur of the moment. Give me the Ham and Egg stories any day. They're real, down to earth, and always good for a laugh. Yours for more Ham and Eggs and less cold Blue Steele.—*Joe Vinson, Denver, Colo.*

You make nice phrases, anyway, Joe, even if you don't like the sheriff of Painted Post. He's quite a man, we'll admit. But why hold that against him? There were lots of good men in the old West.

I think Buffalo Billy Bates is the best character you've got in your magazine, yet you don't have many stories about him any more. I like the Ham and Egg and Blue Steele stories, too, but Billy Bates is my boy. Let's see more of him.—*Fred Windermere, Los Angeles, Calif.*

Hold your hosses, Fred. Billy will be back. He's just been on a short vacation.

And that's about all the missives we have space to quote from in this issue. Remember, all you have to do is drop a postcard or letter to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York, 16, N. Y., and we'll sure be glad to hear from you. Adios till next time, everybody, and many thanks!

—THE EDITOR.

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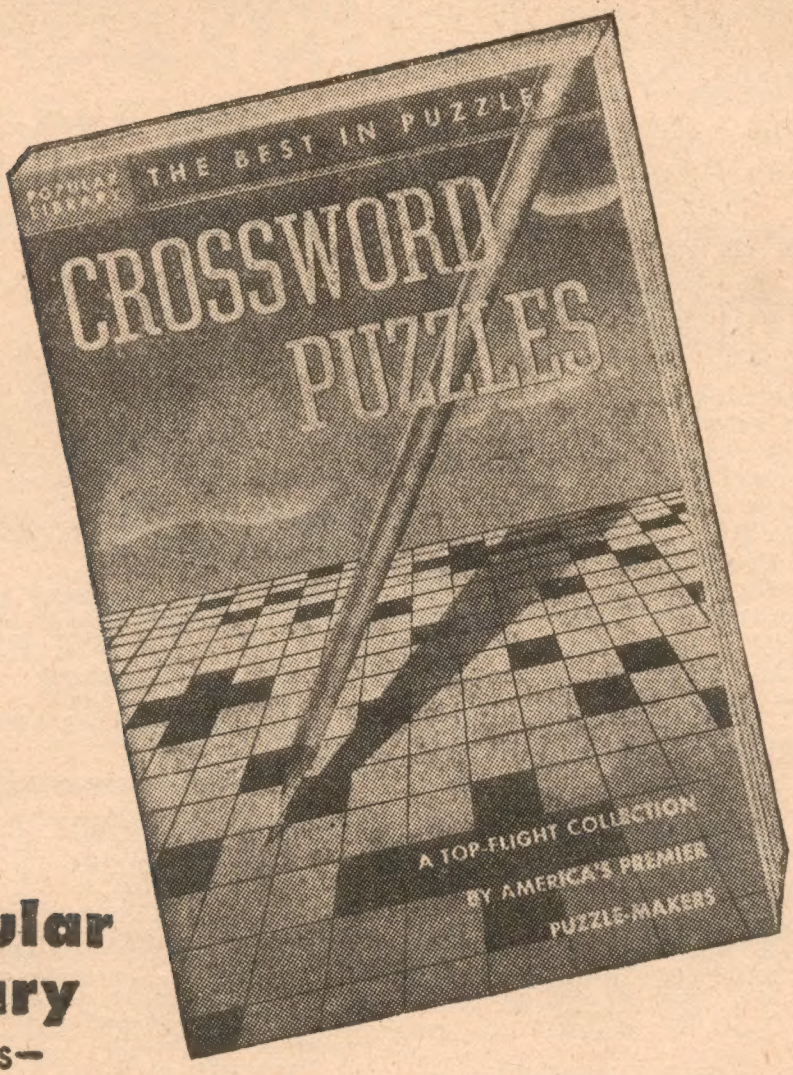

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